

Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Vol. 63 No. 4 2019



Gunther Gebel-Williams, 1969

Robert Handley photograph

About the covers

Gunther Gebel-Williams appears on our cover in a photograph taken by Robert Handley at the University of Illinois Assembly Hall in September 1969. It was the great German animal trainer's first year in America, and Gunther made no less than six appearances in the show. Here the charismatic circus superstar was photographed astride his tiger, Bengal – the two of them towering in the spotlights high atop Gunther's beloved African elephant, Congo. Handley was on hand in Champaign to record the new Red Unit performance with his camera.

Fifty years ago, Irvin Feld had just taken on the immense responsibilities of running Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. The back cover photograph taken in 1969, shows the successful music promoter at the outset of his tenure with the three-ring entertainment giant. Irvin Feld gave the circus many of its biggest stars, and he expanded the show's reach by doubling its capacity with a second unit. He invested in lavishly costumed productions, created Clown College, placed his own brand on circus marketing, and turned the arena concessions business into a foundational centerpiece of the Ringling enterprise. Moreover, he inaugurated a stewardship of the circus that lasted for nearly five decades.

These two men – Gunther Gebel-Williams and Irvin Feld – changed the face of The Greatest Show on Earth and had an immeasurable impact on the history of the circus. We honor them on *Bandwagon's* covers a half century after they first teamed up.

Circus Historical Society

2020 Convention

Trumbull CT • July 26-29

At the Trumbull Marriott Shelton Hotel with separate excursions to

- Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut
- A performance of Circus Smirkus

Details will be available on the CHS website: <<https://circushistory.org>>. A registration form will be in the next issue of *Bandwagon*.



Circus Historical Society

circushistory.org

Mission Statement

"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."

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Bandwagon

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Website and Back Issues

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online at www.circushistory.org. Back issues are available
from the Office of Publication.



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Seeking submissions for Stuart Thayer Prize

Nominations The Circus Historical Society is seeking nominations for this year's Stuart Thayer Prize. The prize recognizes a superior work in circus history and is named in honor of Stuart Thayer, the author of numerous foundational and insightful works published about the antebellum American circus and menagerie.

Eligibility Criteria Nominations can be for published materials in any printed form including books, articles, pamphlets, etc., as well as original works contained in a digital format on a disk or loaded on a permanent website. Eligibility details can be found on the CHS website.

Deadline Nominations must be submitted no later than March 31, 2020. The prize will be awarded during the 2020 convention.

Send Nominations to Niles F. Calhoun, 19 Sylwood Place, Jackson MS 39209.

Call for Convention papers and presentations

CHS members and others who desire to make a presentation at the Circus Historical Society convention in Trumbull CT are invited to submit a proposal by March 31, 2020.

Submissions should include a short abstract of the presentation and any technology needs.

Additional information is available on the CHS website.

The address where to send proposals will be on the CHS website as soon as available.

2020 Dues Reminder: renewals were due by December 15, 2019

If you have already made payment, thank you! If not, you may still renew your membership.

Pay online at www.circushistory.org using PayPal, or make check or money order payable to Circus Historical Society

Mail to: Bob Cline, CHS Treasurer, 2707 Zoar Road, Cheraw, SC 29520
Rates are shown on Page 3

John D. Draper passes

John D. "Dan" Draper, an emeritus professor of chemistry at Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia and lifelong circus fan and historian, died at the age of 100 on October 8, 2019 in Sarasota, Florida.

Born in Hagerstown, Maryland, Draper earned a B.S. in chemistry from Franklin & Marshall College and a Ph.D. in physical organic chemistry from the University of Maryland. Draper worked as a research chemist for Phillips Petroleum Company in Bartlesville, Oklahoma and J. T. Baker Chemical Company in Phillipsburg, New Jersey prior to joining Bethany College's faculty in 1951 as an assistant professor in the Chemistry Department. For over three decades, Draper, who became the Chairman of the Chemistry Department in 1954, dedicated his professional life to teaching and mentoring aspiring students.

Draper's love of the circus began as a child with Dan often reminiscing about watching the circus unload at the railroad yard, seeing the parade on the streets of Hagerstown and then attending the performances at the Willow Lane Show Grounds. For 15 summers beginning in 1966, he

volunteered at Circus World Museum's Library in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Along with his wife of 60 years, Rosalie, and four children, he volunteered at many of the annual Circus Parades in Milwaukee from the 1960s to the 1990s. During the summers of 1981 to 1984, he and Rosalie traveled with Carson & Barnes Circus helping out with various backlot tasks. They also spent time traveling with Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus in 1997.

Draper was a long-term member of the Circus Historical Society. He wrote numerous articles for *Bandwagon*, as well as *The White Tops*, mainly about equestrian acts and performers. His early handwritten equestrian notes and research are maintained at the Library & Research Center at Circus World Museum. His complete equestrian database with over 50,000 entries, part of which is available online, forms the basis of the Draper file of equestrian performers at The Ringling

in Sarasota.

Draper was preceded in death by his wife, Rosalie Sheedy Draper. He is survived by his daughter, Barbara; sons John, David and Paul; five grandchildren; and three great grandchildren.



From the Editor

May All Your Days Be Circus Days

During preparations for the launch of the two 1969 Ringling touring units, management considered alternatives for replacing the long-used John Ringling North program signature, “Thank You and Au Revoir.”¹ Irvin Feld, the new President and Chief Executive Officer of the circus, wanted something different and original – something that would capture the positive heartfelt emotions people experienced seeing the show. A young publicist brought in by the new owners to oversee Public Relations and to produce and edit the new souvenir programs, thought long and hard. When the opportunity presented itself, Jack Ryan casually suggested the now immortal words, “May All Your Days Be Circus Days.”² After considerable discussion and lots of voiced skepticism, the authoritative response was something like “That’s not exactly what we’re looking for. But, let’s use it for right now.”³ That was 50 years ago.

The 1969 official programs for the newly produced Red Unit performance and the reorganized Blue Unit each displayed the seven-word phrase just inside the back cover. Before long, these payoff words were appearing in programs for other circuses and being intoned by a myriad of ringmasters from coast to coast.

When Richard Barstow, the veteran Ringling-Barnum staging director, heard the new phrase, he liked it. So much so, that he began to compose a song based on it. During a 2014 interview, Jack Ryan said that Barstow “...wrote a song with which the show ended for a number of years, and I helped Dick with the lyrics...”⁴ The new song was first used for the finale during the 1972-1973 Blue Unit tour.⁵ The music was arranged by band director Bill Pruyn, and the lyrics were sung by the preeminent ringmaster, Harold Ronk:

“May All Your Days Be Circus Days,
A merry spangled world of delight.
May all your days be children’s laughter,
Ever after, in the spotlight.

“Troubles be gone, swing on high.
Join the parade
Before it passes by.

“May All Your Days Be Circus Days,
One hundred thousand score.
There will always be a circus,
Forever and ever more.”

In this issue of *Bandwagon*, we return to those heady days that saw the birth of Irvin Feld’s two-unit model of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. In an interview conducted by Chris

Berry this past August, Kenneth Feld provides recollections of his father’s successful endeavor to provide American audiences with two star-spangled shows. This is a fitting lead-in to a magnificent review of Ringling’s 1969 tours, another epic article from Chris Berry. In addition, our 50-year retrospective concludes with Chris’s selection of letters written by Merle Evans that documented the famous bandmaster’s observations during his last year traveling with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Once again acknowledging the international connections of the circus, *Bandwagon* spotlights two notable European collections. At the Circus Historical Society gathering earlier this year, Gérard and Jeanne-Yvonne Borg of France shared images of their beautiful 19th century Japanese circus prints. Now they have adapted their convention paper about their fabulous art for our pages. We are also calling attention to the University of Amsterdam’s rich circus archives. Willem Rodenhuis guides us through the historical development and present-day content of these materials in The Netherlands.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to those who went the extra mile to make this installment of our magazine richer than it otherwise would have been. Thank you to Kenneth Feld for candidly sharing his recollections of people and events of 1969. We are also especially indebted to Robert Handley for searching his archives and providing so many great photos from 1969. Hundreds of Merle Evans letters to Sverre Braathen are preserved at Illinois State University’s Milner Library, and Maureen Brunsdale graciously made those treasures available. Pete Shrake scanned an unusually large number of items from Circus World Museum’s collection, and he assisted with the organization and transfer of almost every image for this issue.

What was Jack Ryan aiming at when he coined the now immortal signature so many years ago? “When I created the phrase ‘May All Your Days Be Circus Days,’ my hope was that the magic of circus be yours every day of your life.”⁶ That was the perfect sentiment for those attending the circus 50 years ago, just as it still is for circus goers today. As Editor, I wish the same for every *Bandwagon* reader.

Endnotes

1. The North era signoff appeared in every Ringling-Barnum program from 1948 through 1968 – a span of 21 years.
2. Attachment to Tony Conway letter to Fred D. Pfening, Jr. dated November 4, 1996, a copy provided by Fred D. Pfening III.
3. Ibid.
4. Jack Ryan interview conducted on May 30, 2014 at Circus World Museum by Scott O’Donnell and Pete Shrake, CWM Audio 6, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center.
5. Corroboration by Bill Pruyn per Tony Conway in letter to Fred D. Pfening Jr. dated November 4, 1996, and specific information in attachment to the same Tony Conway letter, op. cit.
6. Jack Ryan wrote this on his website before he died on August 25, 2016.

An Interview with Kenneth Feld

Chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment



On August 13, 2019, Kenneth Feld reflected on the 1969 season with Bandwagon Contributing Editor Chris Berry at Feld Entertainment's corporate offices in Ellenton, Florida.

Feld Entertainment, Inc.

The following interview of Kenneth Feld was conducted by Chris Berry on August 13, 2019.

Chris Berry (CB): *It has been 50 years since what some people would say was one of the biggest years in the history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. You were a young man in 1969, still in college, but what are your recollections of that big year?*

Kenneth Feld (KF): I think the biggest thing about 1969 was 1968. As soon as my father bought the circus in 1967, he knew exactly what he wanted to do and he knew he had to create a second unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Everything that he did, starting in '68 once the season started going, was devoted to "How could we get two tours in 1969?" Of course, the nucleus of



The first graduates of Clown College began performing with the show in 1969. Ceremonial “graduations” were held in several large cities, and while the show was in Houston comedian Milton Berle presented diplomas to (left to right) Danny Chapman, Richard Hanrahan, Joey Matheson, Corky Corbert, Wyane Scott, Hans Herman and Levoie Hips. Circus World Museum

the new show was Gunther Gebel-Williams, and originally the leasing of all of the Circus Williams animals. A lot of their performers came over as well, and then ultimately, a little later on, acquiring the entire Circus Williams.

CB: *In February of 1968, your father [Irvin Feld] publicly dropped the bombshell and said that there was going to be a second show. When did he come up with that idea? Was it before he actually took possession of the circus?*

KF: If it was just going to be doing the circus as it was, he never would have bought it. It never would have added any value to it. He saw the potential. You have to remember that my father started in the touring music business. He knew more about every venue in the U.S. and Canada, than anybody else, because he had played them all with his shows. He knew that there were only some 40 playable weeks in a year and when you have Madison Square Garden taking up eight to ten weeks, you just couldn't play all of these other cities. There was a great pent-up demand and he saw that. Part of the reason why Judge Hofheinz wanted to put the money up and wanted to own Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was that he had just built the Astrodome and adjacent

was Astro Hall which was like a big convention center, and he said “You know what, there is nothing to do in Houston in the summer, and for 12 weeks in the summer the second unit could play.” The good news was we had a place to do it, and we created the whole side show with the circus, and that is where it went. Ultimately, it was the Blue Unit that spent the summer of 1969 in Astro Hall. That enabled my father to create a really solid tour for the second year of the show without having to worry about the summer months which were always the most difficult.

CB: *When you look at 1968, as you were moving into 1969, plans were being made, you had to acquire another train, and in a matter of months put together an entirely new show. How did you get those old school guys, who maybe for the past number of years had been working for kind of an absentee owner, to kind of turn up the gas a little bit and get going?*

KF: It was a big change for everyone because obviously our family had nothing to do with the 1968 show. It was already in production and we sat through rehearsals and it was interesting to watch the process and how it came about. If my father had one qualm, it was maybe “How do you run the

circus?” Once he saw how the show was put together, he had no doubt of how he would put it together. It was a whole different kind of mindset. He saw it was very possible to put on the second unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. He knew that he had to get the best performers in the world – the best acts. Everything about it had to be of equal quality and equal magnitude of the original tour. He literally took people from Madison Square Garden, and I think it was Nashville, Tennessee where the other show was, to see it. Some people liked the Blue Unit better, some the Red Unit, but that is what he wanted, because there was that controversy, but no one said that either was not *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

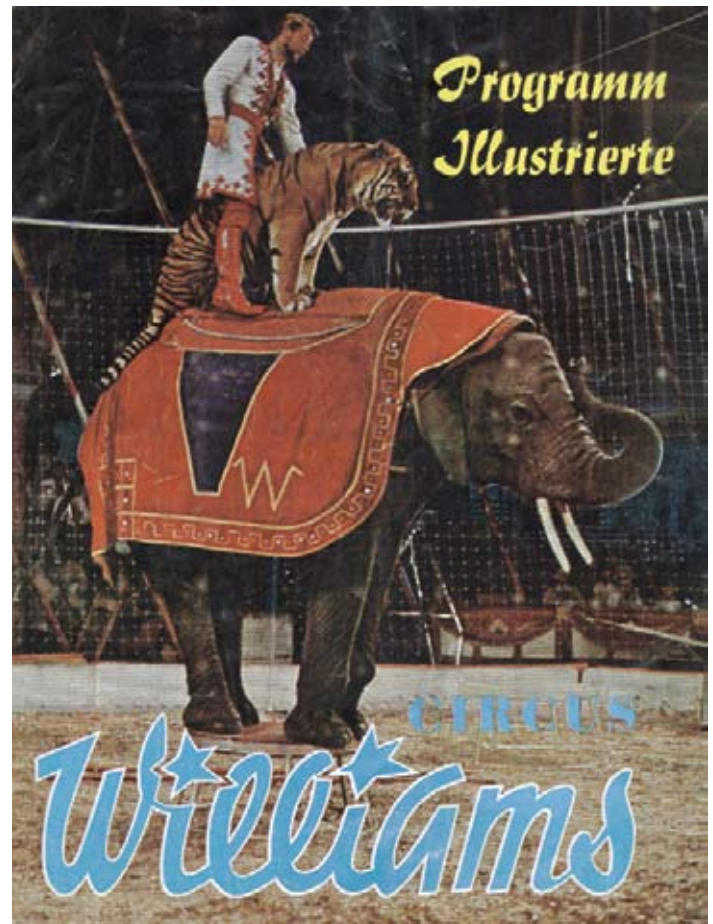
CB: And he had to come up with clowns...

KF: A big part of it was not only getting the acts and the



Former Swedish circus owner Trolle Rhodin accompanied Irvin and Kenneth Feld to dozens of European shows in 1968, recruiting talent for the two units of Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey that toured in 1969.

Rosalie Hoffman photo, Circus World Museum



It was at a performance in Hanover, West Germany in 1968 that Kenneth Feld first saw Gunther Gebel-Williams. The agreement to lease the animals and acts from Carola Williams had a monumental impact on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for decades to come.

Circus World Museum

train built, but also there weren't many clowns, and the clowns were older. My father always said, "I know they can fall down, but can they get up..." It was then that he knew he needed to train clowns, so he started Clown College. He really didn't know where to go, so he went to Mel Miller who was running the circus museum at The Ringling in Sarasota. He went to him and Mel knew enough people locally that they got things together. It was a difficult thing that first year, but it was a good crop of students. Everybody thought it was a publicity stunt, which it was, but it was one that lasted for 25 years.

CB: We are still in 1968, planting the seeds for 1969. It was now summer, and your father was negotiating the deal with Carola Williams to try to get the animals and Gunther Gebel-Williams, but you had dates coming up soon. There must have been pressure there. You were there in '68, right?

KF: In the summer of '68, my job was primarily touring eastern Europe with Trolle Rhodin and seeing all of the circuses and looking for good acts. For me, it was really trying

to understand what was a “good act” and what was just “an act.” It was great. I enjoyed it and got a great education and that continued for quite some time.

CB: *So now you have these acts together, people were figuring out which acts were going to be on which show. Was Tito Gaona going to be on the Red Unit? Was Elvin Bale going to be on the Blue Unit? All of these things were happening, and then you came to Venice. Was that in 1968? Is that when you first came down?*

KF: The first time was after we bought it in the winter of 1967, and then of course in 1968, preparing for the 1969 show. The Red Unit rehearsed the month of December, and it went out in January. Then we went right back into rehearsal with the Blue Unit which was the second year of that tour.

CB: *Tell me a little bit about the first time that you ever saw Gunther Gebel-Williams perform.*

KF: It was in Hanover, Germany in the summer of 1968. My dad said, “This is the greatest performer that I have ever seen.” The thing that I remember more than anything was sitting in the audience and hearing a yell and he was coming from the back of the tent into the ring, and all of the sudden there was this mass of elephants. I think he had nine elephants at the time. The way he moved and the way the elephants responded to his vocal commands was extraordinary, and it was the complete opposite of Hugo Schmitt who had the Blue Unit elephants then. It was something great and he brought a level of energy to the circus that you didn’t see prior to his coming. You would see it maybe in an individual act, but he exuded this energy and he did so many acts. Part of the criteria for him coming to the United States was to create a tiger act. He never had one. He

had a tiger that rode on an elephant and my father said, “You can’t come over without a tiger act,” so he got nine tigers and he trained them and he came over with the act, but it was the first time that he ever trained a full act which was pretty amazing if you think about it.

CB: *You are still at Boston University in 1969 but very much involved and I’m sure you had a lot of conversations with your father and your uncle Israel. What do you think was going through their minds? They kind of had lightning in a bottle with Gunther Gebel-Williams. Did they realize that, or how soon did they realize that?*

KF: My father knew it from the first time he ever saw him in Italy. He came back from that trip and Gunther was all he could talk about, and by the way, John Ringling North had tried to get Gunther to come to the States probably at least for a decade. This was really ground-breaking, and he wanted to come. He flew over early because his biggest con-



Gunther Gebel-Williams became a media sensation when the circus opened at Madison Square Garden in 1969. Although he spoke little English, the German animal trainer was featured in all of the metropolitan newspapers and on national television programs. Circus World Museum

cern was how the animals were taken care of. He wanted to make sure that everything was up to his standards, and they were, so he was happy about that. Also, Gunther was a very different kind of human being from anyone I had ever met before, and possibly since. He was the most positive person. He had this charisma that the audience picked up on and he had an energy and dynamic that anyone who worked with him couldn't ignore. Gunther was a guy who you would see in the back after a show with a broom sweeping and keeping up. He was a man of men. There were people on the shows who might come on hard times, and Gunther would give them some money or write them a check, and it was just because he was a great human being. That came across in his showmanship and his artistry and I think it came across in the relationship that he had with the animals. It was something that hadn't really been seen. It wasn't man over beast, it was man with the animals.

CB: *When you look at that first season of the Red Unit in 1969, between Gunther's elephant act, the tiger act, the horse*

acts that Jeanette and Sigrid were presenting, he was an iron man. Was there ever any discussion of what would happen if he got sick?

KF: He was extraordinary through his whole career. People talk about Billy Joel at Madison Square Garden; Gunther Gebel Williams did more performances in Madison Square Garden than any other human being.

CB: *In 1968 when the show was at the Garden, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Your father and his Super Shows, Inc. were always on the cutting edge when it came to diversity in performances. The show went dark for several days following the assassination of Dr. King and the King Charles Troupe did their audition for your father during that period in April of 1968, and of course they joined the show in 1969. That was groundbreaking in a lot of ways bringing the King Charles Troupe on.*

KF: My dad had actually seen them on the *Johnny Carson Show* and said, "I have to meet them," and that is ultimately



Through the addition of the King Charles Troupe in 1969, Irvin Feld recognized the importance of appealing to all audiences. The African-American performers who played basketball on unicycles were the only all-American act on the Red Unit that season.

Circus World Museum

how he met Jerry King, who was Charlie King's father who had started the whole thing. He wanted them in the show, and for 1969 they premiered in the show and it created very interesting dynamics internally. I think it was the next year, or two years later, when my father said we need another unit, so we had a King Charles Troupe in the Red show and the Blue show as well, because he wanted that kind of diversity. They were great performers, and really great people. It was the right thing to do and it was something that Ringling Bros. through the ages had always embraced. When you can get so many different cultures working together it becomes one of the pillars of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. It isn't just Chinese or Mongolian, or people from Columbia or Mexico. It is people from all over the world, every culture. That is why the circus is so universal. On every country on this planet, they may not call it circus, but there is circus.

CB: Another act that was with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for many years starting in 1969 were the chimps of Sue and Rudi Lenz. How did you take a successful act and keep it new and fresh for over a decade?

KF: Sue and Rudi were unique in that they were the most

devoted people to their chimpanzees. They would literally have tea parties for them. Their act was incredible, taking these amazing animals and getting them to work together. They were the kind of act you could have forever, because people loved them, and people loved chimpanzees. That was something really unique, because they had that staying power and no one ever got tired of what they did.

CB: You mentioned earlier that your father had the knowledge of the arenas that existed and were being built, but when you look back at 1969, how did you book an entire season with such short lead-time?

KF: When my father started, there were six NBA teams and six NHL teams. There were all of these cities that had venues but didn't have content. If you think about it, the music acts were content, and then the Ringling circus came in and he was booking them into these venues that never had the circus before, in Greenville, Richmond, and the International Amphitheatre in Chicago. They needed content. It is a theatre and a theatre needs something in there or otherwise it is just a building. And I think it is just the same with all of these venues. They proliferated and became more luxurious.



In 1969, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey sold stock to the public for the first time. Investors and circus fans alike clamored to own a piece of The Greatest Show on Earth and the first four color stock certificate in America.

The Ringling Museum

CB: *It also allowed you to put other shows out there that were not the circus.*

KF: It is something that we have been known for. We design these shows that can go in for a couple of days, a week or more if needed. We can get in and out and we know how to move it. Everything that we have become at Feld Entertainment is a result of what we learned by having Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. That was the most complex show production that existed anywhere on the planet. It is not just what you learn from doing that, but it is also a thought process and a mentality that if you can produce the circus then nothing is impossible.

CB: *1969 was almost like it was a start-up. You took a brand that had existed for almost 100 years and you reinvigorated it with a second unit, Clown College, Gunther Gebel-Williams and new marketing strategies. You were now licensing the circus on everything from pillow cases to cartoon characters.*

KF: My father had spent a lot of money and his plan was to grow the business and get a return. He wanted to cover the country, not just 42 cities, so we then played 90-some cities every year. That was the second unit. So where else could you go with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey? It so happened at the time that we had a licensing program, and we had the lunchboxes and things like that, and that is what sort of brought us full circle and is one of the reasons why we ended up selling to Mattel. That happened a little later, but we were actually meeting with them trying to sell them on the idea of a Saturday morning television show, because at that time the toy companies, candy companies and the cereal companies controlled Saturday morning kids TV.

CB: *But before you could do that you had to sell it to the public, and in 1969 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey went public, offering stock in The Greatest Show on Earth. What went into that decision?*

KF: Well it was interesting. The initial purchase price was \$8 million which John Ringling North and the other 49-percent stockholders shared, but we put up \$8.5 million. My father and uncle put up \$500,000 for about a third of the circus and operating control. The rest was Hofheinz, the Sutro Company and Wells Fargo Bank. That is how it was financed. It really is no different than today. Somebody had to realize the investment. If you are a private equity firm, at some point you either have to go public or you have to sell it again, or something like that. So, we went public. It was a hot market. We went public at, I think, 64 or 65 times earnings with the first four-color stock certificate in the history of any stock exchange. I don't remember exactly what the opening price was, but it was something like \$13.00 a share. I don't think it ever hit that again, because the dynamics of the markets changed. Then it was a short period of time, from June of 1969 when it went public, to 1970-71 when we started

talking with Mattel and ultimately sold it.

CB: *It was actually a brilliant move. You recouped the investment, you made some money, you sold the show, and then you bought it back.*

KF: It was conceptually brilliant, but you had to remember that it was a 100% stock deal, so the stock went from what the opening value was, down to about 50-cents a share, and it was basically worthless. We were large shareholders, and in 1974 there was a class-action lawsuit because of wrongdoing by Mattel with the financials. We were also a victim of that because we were looking at numbers that weren't real when we made the deal. In return for not joining the class-action lawsuit, our settlement was that we were given the rights to the concessions and that was a gamechanger. It also worked for Mattel because they were guaranteed that we wouldn't join in the class-action suit. We were paying them a royalty, so we had a lot of incentive to continue a good relationship because we had to drive the concession business. It also positioned us as the primary potential buyer in 1982 when they got in trouble again and they had to sell their non-core assets. That was really the reason why we were able to buy back Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in March of 1982, and then it was a completely different economic situation because we had 19% interest rates. It was a huge risk that we took in buying it back, but that is how our role evolved through the Mattel years.

CB: *It has been 50 years since 1969, 100 years since the shows were combined. The circus was a constant throughout those years, yet it was ever changing, even in the decades that followed.*

KF: I think the circus always changed. I think what people saw changed, and it had to. You always had to put new things in. The issue was that the business model, at the core of it, never changed and unfortunately that is what we were left with. What you could do, the sheer cost of it, the railroads, and the timeliness of what was happening created a situation that became impossible to continue with basically that business model in the same way. The shows could change because you had different types of acts and things, but the way of operating the business had to change, and it never did change in a substantial enough way to make a difference.

CB: *When you think back on 1969, you were a young college student, soon to get your diploma, and no doubt eager to get into the family business. What was your vision of the future at that time?*

KF: Number one, I just wanted to go to work with my father. We had this incredible relationship and he was an extraordinary teacher. I think I probably learned everything I know from my father, and everything I didn't know from my kids! He was great at teaching and having you understand why he did what he did. He was always thinking about tomorrow.



Although he was still a student at Boston University in 1969, Kenneth Feld often visited the circus with his father, and traveled to Europe with him to secure new acts for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Circus World Museum

He never thought about yesterday. He would say, "How can we improve this? What else can we do?" He never thought with limits, and I think that was probably the greatest lesson he ever taught me. It has allowed us to go in all of these other places and create what we have today, and it is based upon these philosophical pillars that he had not only for business, but also for life. I have tried to follow it the best way I could, but I also had to understand that I couldn't stop every moment, because I did that for a while after he died, and said, "Well what would he have wanted?" Times were changing, and times are changing more rapidly than ever today, and we have to be constantly in a new and different place. My father knew, up until the day he died he was always thinking "What is the next thing? What is the new thing? How can we change it?" We have always been able to try new things and he was very open to that. The worst thing that could happen

is that it doesn't work. Then you go back and you retool, and then you can study what didn't work and why and was it the wrong time? Did you do it improperly. How can you do something better the next time? If you look at entertainment today, generally around the world, look at how much came from the circus. If you go to a concert today, you are seeing things you never would have seen 30 years ago. The circus lives in a lot of places, not necessarily in one place. A lot of what we do could have been a part of the circus, but now it stands on its own as its own entertainment. **BW**

Feld Entertainment is now in its third generation of family ownership, and although Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey closed in 2017, the company continues to produce some 5,000 performances a year in 75 countries on six continents.

THE GREATEST SHOWS ON EARTH



by Chris Berry

"I would never allow any show that bears the name Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey to be anything less than The Greatest Show on Earth."

– Irvin Feld, *The New York Times*, March 31, 1969

Only three months after he took control of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Irvin Feld dropped a bombshell. On February 29, 1968, as the circus was setting up in Baltimore, he announced that he was planning to tour a second unit, and it would be up and running within a year. "It will be the same size as this show," Feld explained. "It will have the same type of productions, as many animals and as many acts. What we will do is rotate between the two shows. Instead of hiring them for one year, as we do now, we'll hire them for two."¹

Two circuses would require twice as many acts, animals and railroad cars, along with an expanded staff to book, promote and manage the two tours, but Feld was up for the challenge. "There are new buildings springing up all the time that are big enough for the show," he told a reporter. "No city will see the same show two years in a row, or the same performers."²

With that announcement, Irvin Feld essentially turned back the clock 50 years to 1918 when Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros. operated as two separate shows, each

on a route that doubled the number of cities visited each season and each on an independent tour designed to double the number of tickets sold. Exactly 50 years after John, Charles and Alf T. Ringling had merged their mighty shows, the company that they had founded would again be fielding two circuses, equal in size and scope, and both now billed as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

"In the long and storied history...there are few years which can compare in activity and excitement with the year of 1969. It was a dazzling, action-packed 12-months in which the super-spectacular new era of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey really began."³

In that brief paragraph circus publicist Jack Ryan correctly predicted the future of the circus and began the "official" history of that landmark season, memorialized in the final route book issued by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at the end of the 1969. In the pages that followed, Ryan counted off many of the projects that had been initiated "under the dynamic and bold leadership of Irvin Feld." On the surface the account would appear to be a somewhat sanitized, front-office perspective that had been presented by circus owners for nearly a century, however when analyzed 50 years later, the reality of what transpired in 1969 exceeded the polysyllabic vocabulary of a multitude of pundits and press agents.

The "new era" described in the 1969 route book began the moment that John Ringling North transferred ownership of the circus during the highly publicized ceremony at Rome's Colosseum. According to Kenneth Feld, his father had planned two separate companies even before North agreed to the sale. "As soon as my father bought the circus in 1967 he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He knew he had to create a second unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey," Feld said, adding, "If it was going to be just doing the circus as it was, he never would have bought it."

Advertising for the first Red Unit tour included photographs that had originally been used to promote Circus Williams in Europe.

Chris Berry collection

NASA photo of earth taken during the Apollo 8 lunar orbit, December 24, 1968

Once the ink on the contract was dry, Irvin Feld began putting his plan into place. Within days, he was traveling to Milan, Italy with talent scout Trolle Rhodin where they attended a performance of Circo Americano. It was there that Irvin Feld saw Gunther Gebel-Williams for the first time and approached him about joining Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.⁴ Although Gebel-Williams had long dreamed of performing in America, any chance of bringing the act to the United States was incumbent on making a deal with Carola Williams. Gunther's former mother-in-law was the owner of Circus Williams and its animals, and according to her daughter Jeanette Williams, Carola was in Germany on the day that Irvin Feld first visited the show. "Gunther said you have to talk to Carola. I am not the decision-maker," she recalled.⁵

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But Irvin Feld was on a mission and early in 1968 he returned to Europe on a whirlwind six-week tour. During that trip in the spring of 1968 Feld saw 46 circuses in 35 days,⁶ including a visit to Circus Williams, again accompanied by talent scout Rhodin and John Ringling North.⁷

“Mr. Feld was not an easy man to turn down,” Gunther Gebel-Williams recounted in his autobiography, *Untamed*,⁸ and after several meetings with Carola Williams, Rhodin presented a proposal to lease several of her acts, including Gunther Gebel-Williams, for five years. “She was a smart strong-willed woman and drove a very tough bargain,” Kenneth Feld recalled.⁹

According to Jeanette Williams, her mother’s health was also a factor. “My mother needed a back operation. She was not able to function and run the business, and Gunther had been pushing to go,” she recalled. “So, she said, ‘let’s stop for two years and go to America,’ and the rest is history.”¹⁰

“If we had not acquired the Circus Williams animals, we might not have made it,” Irvin Feld told *The New York Times*, explaining that it was far easier to lease trained tigers and elephants than to buy new animals and make performers out of them.¹¹

As the plan began to unfold it was announced that the legacy circus would be known as the Red Unit, and it would be staffed with a combination of old and new acts, while the new company was to be known as the Blue Unit. Although it was being promoted as “new” the Blue Unit would feature veteran Ringling acts such as Charly Baumann’s tigers, Hugo



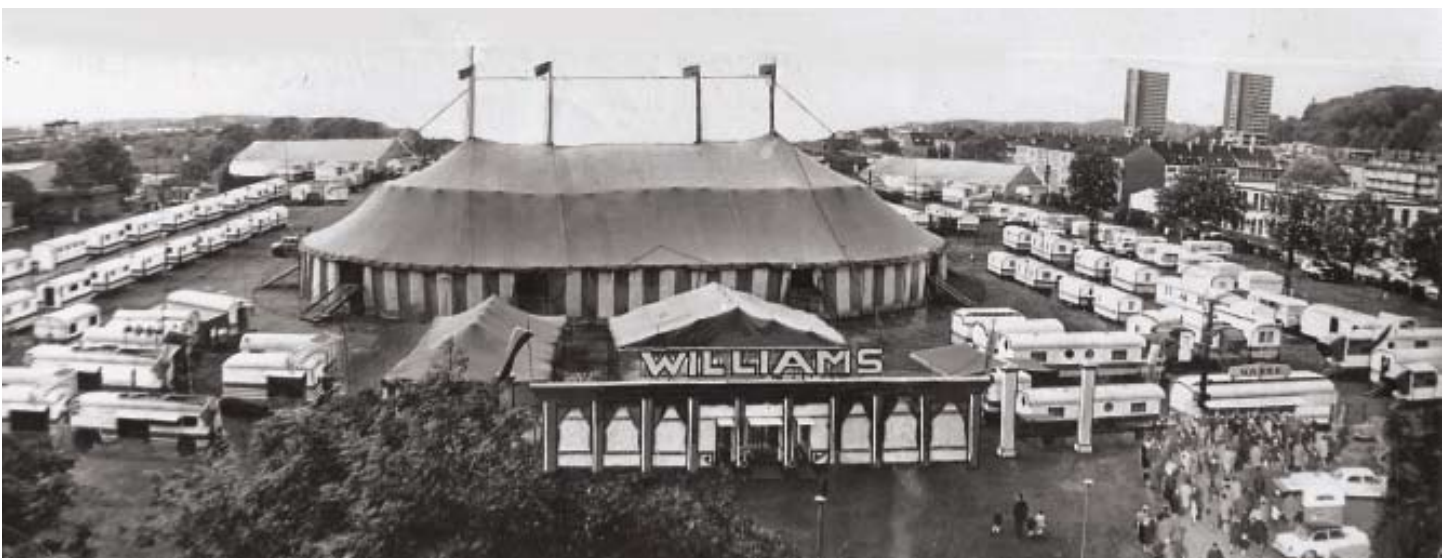
Elvin Bale was hired for the new Blue Unit in 1969 and for the first time in the history of the circus a male was the featured performer during the aerial ballet.

Circus World Museum

Schmitt’s elephants and The Donnert’s riding act.

Still many new performers would be needed, and among those who would be hired for the new show in 1969 was Elvin Bale, who had grown up on the Ringling show, but had been away from it for six years.

With the circus world buzzing about the new unit in early 1968, Bale reached out to Rhodin who told him that his best opportunity to audition would be at the St. Louis Police Circus in May. Irvin Feld would be visiting the show with an eye toward recruiting additional talent, and Rhodin



Almost the entire performing company of Circus Williams was absorbed by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey through Irvin Feld’s lease agreement with Carola Williams. The German circus is shown here in 1968.

Jeanette Williams photographs, Circus World Museum

hinted that if Feld liked what he saw, there might be a chance to join the new circus.

The 23-year old Bale immediately contacted L. N. Fleckles, who was producing the St. Louis circus, but was told the program had been finalized and he did not need another trapeze act. "I said I will give you a deal," Bale recalled, "I will do all ten days for \$500." At \$25.00 a performance, he not only got the job but also was featured in an innovative aerial display. As Feld watched the performance in St. Louis, he could not help but notice that the presentation had a fresh look. Unlike a traditional aerial ballet where a female was featured in the center ring, a young man was now the focus of the act, surrounded by a group of showgirls. "Mr. Feld liked what he saw," Bale recalled. He was hired for the new Blue Unit, and when the show opened in 1969, for the first time in the history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey the aerial ballet was built around a male trapeze artist. "I was in heaven," Bale said.¹²

Also hired for the Blue Unit in early 1968 was the motorcycle high-wire act performed by Jose Guzman and his wife Monique. Like Elvin Bale, "Chico" Guzman had spent his youth on the Ringling circus, joining the show as a 13-year old roustabout when the big top was being set up in San Antonio on October 1, 1952. In the years that followed, Guzman learned the flying trapeze from Clayton Behee and had worked as part of Art Concello's "Flying Comets" when the circus was playing stadiums and ballparks in the late 1950s.

In 1967, Guzman was selling concessions on the Ringling circus when he heard that a high-wire motorcycle act was for sale. "Karl Wallenda actually bought the rigging for the Sky Cycle and I paid him back with the money that I earned performing in 1968," Guzman recalled. It was during one of those performances with the Tom Packs Shrine Circus in Hartford, Connecticut that talent scout Trolle Rhodin came to the show looking for acts.

"Mr. Rhodin did not speak with us that day, but it gave me an idea," Guzman said. As soon as the Packs circus ended on April 28, he and Monique made the drive to New York and began looking for Irvin Feld. "We were in the audience at Madison Square Garden and someone said 'There is Mr. Feld by the exit.' By the time I got down there he was gone, but I knew he was in the building." After knocking on several doors in the executive suite he opened one and found Feld engaged in conversation with circus vice president Rudy Bundy. "I said, 'My name is Joe Guzman and I do a motorcycle act.'" Feld invited him in and after about a half hour he asked Guzman if he could put his Sky Cycle rigging up in the Garden. "Without really thinking about it I said, 'of course I can,' and he said, 'come in tomorrow morning and set it up.'"

The next morning Feld arrived for the audition. "Naturally the motorcycle had some kind of trouble. I couldn't get it up the wire," he recalled. Yet despite the temperamental motorcycle, Guzman said that Feld was very understand-



Joseph and Monique Guzman auditioned with their Sky Cycle during an actual circus performance at Madison Square Garden.

Robert Hanley photograph

ing, and then stunned him: "Can you fix that thing and do it again tonight in the show?" Feld asked. Guzman agreed to get the motorcycle running that day, excited about the opportunity to audition for *The Greatest Show on Earth* in front of a paying crowd at Madison Square Garden.

That night, ringmaster Harold Ronk announced that a special act had been added to the show, and as Merle Evans and the band played a waltz, Jose's souped-up motorcycle roared up the incline nearly five stories to the ceiling of the Garden. Once they reached the top, the motorcycle began spinning as Monique performed on the attached trapeze and Jose executed his acrobatic skills on the handlebars and seat of the bike.

"He auditioned us in front of the audience as if we were already part of the show," Guzman recalled with some astonishment. "It was amazing. He must have liked my approach. I just showed up, knocked on the door and told him what I did. He ended up giving us a four-year contract."¹³

Another performer who tried out in New York actually auditioned in a hotel room. Bob Welz had been performing as a juggler with the Harlem Magicians comedy basketball show when he heard that the new circus was looking for a singing ringmaster. Welz had some experience as an

announcer with both the Carden-Johnson and Hamid-Morton circuses, but he was mostly known for his juggling and slack-wire act. "Most of my singing had been done in church," he recalled.

After Welz sent tapes to the New York agent who was working with the circus, he was told to meet with vice president Allen Bloom at the Waldorf Astoria. "We talked and he asked me to sing, so I sang the Jerome Kern classic *Make Believe* a cappella." Bloom liked the tall 29-year-old redhead and gave him a ticket to Venice. After auditioning again for director Richard Barstow, Bob Welz was signed on as the first ringmaster of the new Blue Unit.¹⁴

Tito Gaona recalled that there was tremendous excite-

Minson's success promoting the act was a result of the tenacity that he had demonstrated when he booked their first television appearance on a prime-time game show in 1965, shortly after he first saw them performing in Crotona Park in the South Bronx.

"I looked at the credits of *I've Got a Secret* and got the name of a producer," recalled Minson. "I got some pictures of the guys, sent them in, and we were booked on the show." Also appearing on the program that same night was Ingeborg Rhodin, whose dressage act was featured on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and coincidentally whose husband recruited acts for the circus. "Even at 15, I was smart enough to know that I was with the talent scout from Ringling Bros., so I started talking to him."¹⁶

Soon after that first meeting, Trolle Rhodin pitched the unicycle act to John Ringling North, however, it was not until Irvin and Israel Feld bought the circus that they were hired. The Felds had a history of promoting acts regardless of race or prejudice. From their first record stores in Southwest Washington D.C., to singers as diverse as Fats Domino and Paul Anka, the Felds provided entertainment that transcended any racial barriers that existed at the time. With their track record on diversity, it came as no surprise that the new owners would "break the color barrier" and hire the first black performers to be featured in a performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Only two days after the circus opened its 1968 appearance at New York's Madison Square Garden, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, sparking the greatest wave of social unrest in the United States since the Civil War. In response to King's murder, Ringling Bros. and Barnum

& Bailey canceled performances for several days out of respect for the slain civil rights leader.

During the time that the show was dark, Feld spoke with Trolle Rhodin about the unicycle act that he had seen on *The Tonight Show* two years before, and fortunately Rhodin still had Bill Minson's telephone number. "Trolle called me and we scrambled together about six guys. We came down to Madison Square Garden and did a short audition, if you can call it that. It was really just a little basketball dribbling on the unicycle," Minson recalled.

Shortly after the brief audition, the troupe's teenage manager received a call from Rhodin telling him to report to Irvin Feld's suite at the St. Moritz Hotel. It was during that meeting when Minson signed the contract which would put the act on the circus in 1969.

Although Minson had successfully negotiated the con-



The King Charles Troupe was auditioned by Irvin Feld just days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968.

King Charles Troupe Archives

ment among the performers as it became clear that things were changing. "Irvin Feld was like a kid when he was planning the new show," he recalled. "I never saw a man who loved the circus as much as he did."¹⁵

While literally dozens of artists were being recruited in the spring of 1968, it was an historic news event that occurred while the circus was in New York that spring which may have been a catalyst for signing one of the longest-running acts in the history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Even before he purchased the circus, Irvin Feld had been impressed by a group of teenagers from the Bronx who he had seen on *The Tonight Show* in 1966. The act had been booked by Bill Minson, its 16-year-old manager who had also put them on several other national television programs, including Merv Griffin, Garry Moore and Mike Douglas.



An entirely new train was acquired for the new Blue Unit in 1969. The railroad cars were freshly painted with a new color scheme and lettering.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum

tract with Feld, he still needed to use his powers of persuasion with the parents of the ten youngsters, all who were between the age of 14 and 21. "I was only 18 myself," Minson recalled. "I had to legally become their custodian and I was just a kid! Suddenly we were no longer just a group of neighborhood boys who went home after making a television appearance. We were going on the road!"¹⁷

As new acts were being signed, management roles were also being defined. Harold "Tuffy" Genders was given the job of general manager for the Red Unit, and Lloyd Morgan was put in charge of the Blue Unit. Morgan's first assignment was to acquire and refurbish the 20 coaches, animal cars and flats that would make up the new circus train.

The show bought nine former mail-baggage cars from the Rock Island Railway that were rebuilt as stock cars, sleepers, and a tunnel car. In addition, seven sleeping cars from the New York Central's 20th Century Limited were also refurbished, and four new 96-foot flat cars were ordered from the ACFR shops in St. Louis, the first flats to be used by any American circus in over a dozen years.

The new Blue Unit train in 1969 was made up of 20 cars while the Red Unit carried 25. At 1,753 feet, the new train was made up of eleven coaches/sleepers, four stock cars, four piggy-back (flat) cars and one tunnel car. The Red Unit train, which had originally been built during the 1960 tour, consisted of seven end-loading tunnel cars, four stock cars for animals and 14 coaches/sleepers. The Blue Unit's new flat cars were 96-feet long and all the other railcars were 85-and-a-half feet long, with each car weighing approximately 100 tons.¹⁸

In addition to the new train the show needed wagons to shuttle props and other supplies from the railyards to the arenas. Rather than build all new equipment, a dozen trailers that had been built in Lille, France for the short-lived Ringling European tour of 1963 were shipped to Florida along with some of the rigging and equipment that had been created for the overseas show.¹⁹ The Blue Unit wagons would be pulled from the runs to the arena by tugs made by the Clark company, while the Red Unit used a Mercedes Unimog that had been brought to the United States with other Circus Williams equipment.²⁰

Transporting the surplus wagons from Europe proved to be a much easier task than moving animals and people, however the lease of Circus Williams required that a menagerie of elephants, tigers, horses and birds, along with performers and grooms, had to make the trip across the Atlantic.

The first group of Germans to arrive consisted of Jeanette Williams and a group of about 20 workers and their families who sailed to New York on the Dutch ocean liner *Nieu Amsterdam*.

Immediately after she arrived, Jeanette, infant daughter Caroline and her nanny were given airline tickets from New York to Macon, Georgia where they joined her cousins Franz and Evy Althoff for the final stand of the 1968 season. After the show closed in Macon, they all traveled to the Venice winter quarters, arriving ahead of the Circus Williams animals and personnel that were enroute from Germany.

Looking back 50 years, Jeanette Williams remembers how she had expected the Venice property to be much larger. "I couldn't believe that they were going to cram two shows



into this winter quarters,” she recalled “but it worked because each unit went out at different times.”²¹

As Jeanette Williams was beginning her adjustment to life in the United States, the animals owned by her mother were still at sea, on board the *Atlantic Saga*, a cargo ship that was carrying 17 elephants, eight tigers and some three dozen horses. In addition, there were about 35 people from Circus Williams, including Gunther Gebel-Williams, a group of his trusted animal handlers, his wife Sigrid, and her daughter Tina.²²

“It was a horrible trip,” remembered Sigrid Gebel. “What should have taken one week was two.”²³ Years later Gunther Gebel-Williams spoke of the voyage and its challenges, which began shortly after the animals arrived at the docks in Bremer-



Above, Gunther’s new tigers and other Circus Williams animals were loaded on the Atlantic Saga in the port city of Bremerhaven, West Germany. During the voyage to the United States, the ship encountered rough seas that extended the trip for days.

*Jeanette Williams photographs,
Circus World Museum*

Left, Gunther Gebel-Williams was concerned that the 17 elephants being taken to American might be spooked when they reached the hold of the ship. He worked with the captain to ensure there was no noise or disturbance while they were being brought on board.

*Jeanette Williams photographs,
Circus World Museum*



Sigrid Gebel began her circus career when she joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1969. Soon she became an accomplished performer.

Circus World Museum

haven. "I told the captain that once I walked the elephants on board, I did not want the slightest bit of noise or disturbance that might spook them and make them run. I had to move 17 elephants onto the ship and chain them into their places as quickly as possible. It only took about five minutes, but I was so relieved when it was over."²⁴

Shortly after the modern-day Noah's Ark got underway it encountered rough seas and nearly everyone on board, and most of the animals, became seasick. As he reflected on the trip, Gunther said that one of the most difficult challenges during the voyage was shoveling hundreds of pounds of manure in the hold of the ship and then taking it up to the deck where it would be tossed into the sea. "We had to haul it to the upper deck and throw it overboard," he said. "And each time we did it we had to tie ropes to our chest so that we did not disappear over the side with the manure."²⁵

After nearly two weeks at sea, *The Atlantic Saga* sailed past the Statue of Liberty and arrived in Elizabeth, New Jersey where the horses, tigers and props were loaded onto trucks for the trip to Venice. The elephants were to be transported to winter quarters by train, but after the long ocean voyage they had to be coaxed onto the railcars, a process that took hours.

With the animals enroute to Florida, Gunther, Sigrid

and Tina began driving down the eastern seaboard to the circus winter quarters. "I was there the day he showed up," rookie clown Scott Bryan recalled. "Gunther was driving a cab-over engine single-axle Mercedes truck attached to a big beige semi-trailer with gold trim. Sigrid was following behind in a Mercedes 350 SL convertible. It was pretty cool," he said.²

Reflecting on their arrival 50 years later Sigrid Gebel said it was an exciting time, "We came to another country not knowing the language, not really knowing anything," she said. "We did not know about America, we did not know about the audiences, the buildings or the travel. It was all brand new. It was exciting and scary at the same time."²⁷

One of the challenges facing Gunther Gebel-Williams was the new tiger act. When he was with Circus Williams he had performed with a tiger and two elephants, but it was not until shortly before he left Germany that he first performed a complete act with big cats. "We told him that he couldn't



Red Unit General Manager Tuffy Genders and aerialist Vicki Unus were photographed backstage at the Chicago Amphitheater. Performance Director Bob Dover can be seen in the background.

Rosalie Hoffman photograph, Circus World Museum



Although Gunther Gebel-Williams had performed with his tiger named Bengal and elephants in Europe, it was not until he came to the United States that he regularly presented an act with a group of tigers.

Robert Handley photograph

come over without a tiger act, so he set about acquiring tigers and training them,” Kenneth Feld recalled.²⁸

The winter quarters were already buzzing when the train arrived in Venice at the end of the 1968 season. “When we got to winter quarters people were already there,” recalled Gyorgy Zsilak, the Hungarian juggler known as Fudi. “Everybody had heard about the second unit, but we really never even got it in our head that there were going to be two circuses.”²⁹

As publicist Jack Ryan explained years later, the new show was created when “the Felds went on a buying spree that was incredible.”³⁰ Irvin Feld described how he scouted for the European acts in a first-person account that he penned for *Variety* in early 1969:

“Once in a while, after a couple of weeks on dusty lots in the midst of a blazing Italian summer, you get the feeling that you’ve seen everything. Then, out of the blue, comes an act so spectacular that you get shivers up your spine. The talent is there. You just have to go out and beat the bushes to find it.

“The name Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey is a magic passport. I do not speak Italian or French very well but when I was being introduced, I could always make out the word ‘Ringling’ in the conver-

sation. Eyes brightened, and smiles widened when the name was mentioned.

“At all of the small touring shows, we were treated as honored guests, usually occupying seats trackside in front of the one-ring circus. Sawdust is still used in European circuses and we were always on the first row. After a particularly athletic horse or elephant act, we found ourselves with sawdust not only in our shoes but everywhere. We learned not to wear dark suits.”³¹

Among the extraordinary European acts signed for 1969 were the Pio Nock Troupe, and the Lindstroms high-wire act along with Rudi and Sue Lenz whose chimpanzee act had been on Irvin Feld’s radar since he took control of the circus.

“In the fall of 1967, Mr. Feld and Trolle Rhodin contacted us to see if we would be interested in coming to America, but we were booked for the following year with Circus Knie in Switzerland,” Sue Lenz recalled. “Then in 1968, when we were in Zurich, Irvin and Trolle came to see us again and Rudi said, ‘America is a wonderful country and we should not miss this chance.’”

It was not long after the Lenz’ decided to come to the United States that they learned that many other acts they



Gunther Gebel-Williams was a presence throughout the performance handling elephants and tigers, and he would frequently join his wife Sigrid assisting with the liberty horses.

Robert Handley photograph

had previously worked with would also be on the program in 1969. "It was a very nice surprise when we heard that all of Circus Williams was coming as well as so many of the acts that we already knew."³²

As the European performers began arriving at the winter quarters, they each met with Jack Ryan so that he could develop angles for pitching their acts to newspaper and television reporters. "I got down to Venice and went into early rehearsals," he recalled. "As I watched the man in the cage with the tigers, I was quite amazed. Then I watched him with the elephants, and all he did was vocal commands. At that point I was completely 'gob-swobbled' if that is a word."³³

Although Ryan was able to land many interviews for Gunther that first season, he said that the real breakthrough came when the *New York Times* featured the blond animal trainer on the front page of the Arts and Leisure section. Ryan said that after that story appeared, everyone wanted to talk to Gunther, including Johnny Carson who still hosted *The Tonight Show* from New York. Even though his English was limited, the young German animal trainer was a hit.

If the public image of Gunther Gebel-Williams was still being developed while the show was rehearsing in winter quarters, the circus press agents were already cranking out stories about Clown College, which graduated 28 new

clowns in early December. "Everybody thought it was a publicity stunt, which it was," recalled Kenneth Feld, "but it was one that lasted for 25 years."³⁴

Among those in that first graduating class was Scott Bryan, who would be assigned to the Red Unit. He too remembered the immediate impact that Gunther had on the circus. "He was the whole show from day one. He was in everything. He did menage, the spec, the tigers, the elephants, and during the liberty horse acts he was there, standing just outside of the ring. Without Gunther, I don't see how there could have been a new show in 1969."³⁵

Even veteran American animal trainers were amazed by the young German's versatility. Among them, Johnny Herriott who later said, "After the arrival of Gunther, the elephant trainers, cat trainers and horse trainers *all* headed for the practice barn!"³⁶

It was not just animal trainers who were practicing in the fall of 1968. The entire cast of the Red Unit was soon rehearsing for a program that would feature a variety of European acrobats and animal acts, along with rookie clowns, and the group of teenagers who could play basketball on unicycles yet had never appeared in a circus.

Donald "Keywash" Stewart, one of the original members of the King Charles Troupe, spoke with author and historian



Jeanette Williams was responsible for a large number of horses from Circus Williams that were featured in the Red Unit performance.

Rosalie Hoffman photograph, Circus World Museum

Lane Talburt about their first public appearance with the circus on January 6, 1969, and the fact that a Hungarian performer named Alec Sebaszian had been tasked with teaching the youngsters acrobatic skills. "Once we finished our act the circus fans started clapping," Stewart recalled. "Alec was crying, and we were saying, 'Why is Alec crying? Was our act that bad?' And Alec said, 'No. they liked you.'"³⁷

The enthusiastic response from the American audience was also a surprise for some of the European acts that had been accustomed to performing in a one-ring environment. "In Europe when you finish doing a particular trick the people would applaud," recalled Sue Lenz. "Even though we were in the center ring, there were a lot of people in the big arenas. When we would finish the trick people would then look to see what the other acts were doing. We would all finish together however and get our applause at the end."³⁸

The proximity of the three rings, especially at the Venice winter quarters, was also an issue for veteran circus performer Jeanette Williams. "I was a nervous wreck," she recalled. "I was surprised that the mares in rings one and

three were so close to my stallions, and I was working with 18 of them in a ring that was smaller than what we were accustomed to in Europe."

The situation improved when the show left Venice for St. Petersburg where there was more space in the arena. "I had more control, but we were constantly on hard flooring," she said. "There was no straw for bedding the horses, only sawdust, and when the sawdust would get wet, they would slip and slide. I finally had to hire people to put rubber shoes on those horses."³⁹

The first national reviews came from performances at the new 6,500-seat Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg, and the notices focused on the new energy that flowed from the circus. "Gebel-Williams, billed with the cat act, is obviously much more than that," reported *Variety*. "Aggressive, individually talented and an accomplished showman, he gives the show life that even the old editions in their primes would find hard to match." The review went on:

"From the look of the show and from the elephant count, Ringling Red easily passes comparisons to previous editions of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Put together by 20-year Ringling veteran Richard Barstow, with aerial director Antoinette Concello, the three-hour show has not only the look of Ringling but the feel as well. Ringling Red is carrying a big collection of topflight acts, led by the Flying Gaonas, last season's top attraction, along with five production numbers and the reassuring intonations of ringmaster Harold Ronk."⁴⁰

One of the local newspaper reviews summed it up when it reported, "The Circus is slicker and better than ever."⁴¹

As soon as the Red Unit left Venice for St. Petersburg the Blue show began rehearsals for a performance that also featured several new acts, yet followed much of 1968 program including "Carnaby Street," that was presented exactly as it had been in 1968. The menage number was described as "psychedelic perambulations of peerless pachyderms," and is memorable for the fact that Hugo Schmitt's elephants were presented as five-ton flower children with large daisies painted on their backs.

The 1968 Blue Unit also featured Charly Baumann and his eight tigers, along with three dog acts; the Stephensons, the Naganas and the Sebastians, and several newcomers including the Gibsons and the Oslers on the flying trapeze and aerialist Sarah Chapman, wife of Danny Chapman, manager of day-to-day activities and instruction at the new Clown College.

Although she was new to the Ringling circus, Chapman had grown up in Sarasota and had performed balancing trapeze on King Bros., Carson and Barnes and at the Circus Hall of Fame. "The Ringling circus was the epitome of a career," she recalled, yet in the days leading up to the Blue Unit premiere, her role was still undefined.



Charly Baumann had already been a featured attraction for five years when the Blue Unit opened. He would be identified with the show for the next 14 years, retiring from the ring in 1983.

Robert Handley photograph

"They didn't know what to do with me," she recalled. After auditioning both the single and balancing trapeze acts at her home in Sarasota and again at the Venice winter quarters, she had not been told whether either act would be featured in the performance. "I went through rehearsals as a showgirl, with no mention of where my act was going to be," she recalled. Shortly before the show opened, management decided that she would perform her single trapeze on the hippodrome track by an end ring, however at showgirl salary, "It was difficult for me to be risking my life for \$125 a week," she recalled.

Because of issues with her trapeze rigging during the opening in Venice, Chapman developed a wound on her legs that developed into an infection. Although she continued to perform, it became clear that her act would have to be changed. During a meeting in Knoxville, performance director Jack Joyce suggested that she switch to her balancing bar act that could be presented in the ring over Charly Baumann's tiger cage.

The adjustments were made, and Sarah Chapman's balancing act became a classic of the era, in part because of the staging and the music arranged by the new Blue Unit band-leader Bill Pruyn. "In Houston that summer, Bill called me

backstage and said he had some music he had been working on for my act," she recalled. "He mentioned something about Porgy and Bess, and I said, 'what is that?'" He said, "Sarah, if anyone can work to Gershwin it is you." Pruyn's arrangement of *Bess, You Is My Woman Now* was sensational, and so was the new act. Six years after that first season Sarah Chapman remained a featured performer with the circus.⁴²

Sarah Chapman's husband, Danny, was part of the Blue Unit clown alley in 1969 and was an integral part of Clown College from the beginning. There were only 16 clowns on the payroll when John Ringling North sold the circus at the end of the 1967 season, and according to Scott Bryan, a member of the first graduating class, Chapman's contributions recruiting and instructing rookie clowns cannot be overstated. "Danny Chapman was the greatest," Bryan recalled. "There would not have been a Clown College without him. He scrounged up props and even brought people he knew from around Sarasota to be a part of the first class."

If, as P. T. Barnum was quoted as saying, "Clowns are the pegs on which the circus is hung," finding enough of them to staff two circuses was critical. Even veteran clown Lou Jacobs acknowledged that a school for clowns was an innovative way to recruit talent. "Being a clown is a trade, but it is



Sarah Chapman was among the acts signed for the new Blue Unit in 1969. Her husband, Danny Chapman, was deeply involved in teaching the first class of Clown College.

Sarah Chapman collection

not like being an electrician,” Lou Jacobs said. “People have to be born for it, and some of these kids are very gifted.”⁴³

Bryan had fond memories of both Jacobs and Otto Griebing teaching the first classes. “Lou and Otto came right away, and they were the greatest, and every day Pat Valdo would be there with his suit and tie and hat on, watching all of us learn to be clowns.”

Among those in that first graduating class was 21-year-old Reggie Montgomery, the first black clown in the history of the Ringling circus. For that first season with the Red Unit, Montgomery wore a brown derby, orange vest, bright yellow jacket and plaid pants, along with very little make-up. With only a dot of clown white above and below the eyes, a little zinc oxide, olive oil and some red on his nose, Montgomery said he wanted the audience to know that he was black. “Right from the first I did not want to go into white face,” he said. “I did not want to pass as white. I wanted to be myself.”

Montgomery had been appearing at Sarasota’s Asolo



CHS member Robert Handley captured Lou Jacobs in a private moment during the show’s engagement at the Assembly Hall in Champaign, Illinois in September of 1969.

Robert Handley photograph

Theatre when he was offered a spot at Clown College and upon graduation a job at \$155 a week, regular pay for new clowns. “It had not entered by mind before,” Montgomery recalled, “but I was especially honored. I was asked to be a clown and I thought it would try it.”⁴⁴

On December 9, 1968, the class of 28 newly minted clowns received their diplomas from Irvin Feld generating a wave of nationwide publicity. Later in the season, mock graduation ceremonies were held in New York, Houston and at the Forum in Inglewood, California where clowns were given diplomas by Red Skelton and Milton Berle, and once again the newspapers picked up on the story.

If the “First of May” clowns were still learning their trade, the Red Unit program also featured several veteran performers including Victoria Unus. After an absence of three seasons, “La Toria” was back in the center ring with an act that was punctuated by a dazzling series of whirling somersaults while suspended high above the arena by only one arm. Just as an earlier generation had applauded Lillian



Victoria Unus, billed as La Toria, thrilled Red Unit audiences with an act that was inspired by that of Lillian Leitzel.

Rosalie Hoffman photograph, Circus World Museum

Leitzel, the audience delighted in counting her planges.

The Flying Gaonas from Mexico and The Flying Waynes from Australia were also returning acts to the show, appearing just prior to the finale and performing to a classic medley of Merle Evans orchestrations consisting of “Tropic to Tropic,” “The Blue Danube” and “Eclipse Galop.”⁴⁵

The two flying trapeze acts were presented with split-second timing with only a moment between tricks, permitting the audience to witness two triple somersaults, performed by Tito Gaona and Sergio Gutierrez (Ramos). “We had a very friendly rivalry,” recalled Mary Gill-St. Leon of the Flying Waynes.⁴⁶

Both the Waynes and the Gaonas had been with the circus for several seasons, yet as he reflected back 50 years Tito Gaona said that 1969 was special. “It was a tremendous circus, an incredible show,” he said.⁴⁷ That sentiment was echoed by Mary Gill, who said the show was energized by the arrival of Gunther Gebel-Williams, “He was fantastic,” she said, “simply marvelous.”⁴⁸



Rogana climbed a ladder while holding a dagger in her mouth, the tip of which balanced the point of a sword that steadied a tray of liquid-filled glasses.

Rosalie Hoffman photograph, Circus World Museum

Another spectacular new act was Rogana, who was billed as “The Baroness of Balance.” Born Dora Rogge to a well-known German circus family, she and her husband Frank Foster were among the new acts on the Red Unit in 1969. Dressed in a sparkling blue costume with a lavish Indian headdress, Rogana would place the handle of a dagger in her mouth, then balance a sword on the trip of the dagger. On the top of the sword handle was a tray of glasses containing liquid. Once she had the apparatus in place, she would then climb a swaying ladder still balancing the tray of drinks on the sword. “She was class,” Sarah Chapman recalled. “Solid class.”⁴⁹

The 1969 Red Unit also included five production numbers that were arguably as ambitious as any ever staged by the circus. The opening production was titled “Riding High,” which reached its climax as Gunther Gebel-Williams made his first appearance along with Henry Schroer, a cousin of Jeanette Williams. The two raced around the hippodrome each straddling two horses as Merle Evans’ band played an



Ingeborg Rhodin presented liberty horses on the Red Unit in 1969. Her husband Trolle Rhodin was a talent scout for both Irvin Feld and John Ringling North.

Rudy Bundy scrapbook, Bill Armstrong collection

months then changed into tights, but I had to wear mine for the whole year and I hated it.”⁵²

Gunther’s costumes were not the only thing that evolved as the season progressed. In the weeks after the Florida premiere his hair became blonder and his beard, described by *The Washington Post* as “cool and hip,” disappeared. “I didn’t like it, so I asked him to take it off,” said Sigrid Gebel. “I also did his hair, which was a difficult task since every week we were in a different town with different water. After many different shades we got it to the right color and then we kept it that way.”⁵³

The next big production number was an aerial ballet created by Antoinette Concello titled “Garden in the Sky.” The number began with 32 young men pushing flower pots onto the hippodrome track. “After we would water the flower pot, we would take the top off and a girl would come out of each of the 32 flower pots and go up the web,” Fudi recalled.

In addition to the 32 girls on the web, high above the center ring was a track where Hilda and Andre Prince, known as The Hildalys, performed while riding a bicycle upside down across the top of the arena. Hilda Prince was the sister of former Ringling wire-walker Harold Alzana, who had assisted in developing the act’s complex rigging.

The final number before intermission was the spec titled “’Twas the Night Before Tomorrow.” It was a futuristic fanta-

1894 march titled “The Ben Hur Chariot Race.”⁵⁰

The Roman Riding act was extremely dangerous. “They performed at such a high speed that we were always thinking there was no way those horses could stop,” the juggler Fudi recalled.⁵¹

According to Henry Schroer, the act was made all the more difficult because of the gladiator costumes that had been created by Max Weldy. “It was made of some kind of plaster that was mixed with fiber glass,” he said. “Not only did it pinch your skin where the front and back part came together it started to fall apart from the first day. Gunther wore his only a couple of

Kenneth Feld joined his father Irvin, and uncle Israel, for the gala opening of the Red Unit at Madison Square Garden, April 1, 1969.

Circus World Museum





The seven tunnel cars used by the Red Unit had been purchased from the U. S. Army Medical Corps and refurbished in 1960. The train was designed to carry circus wagons that were pulled by a small tractor through the train in much the same manner as flat cars had been loaded for generations before.

Robert Handley photograph

sy where a little boy, played by clown Luis de Jesus, dreamed of his favorite storybook characters, only to be transposed into an astronaut, no doubt taking advantage of the Apollo 11 and 12 moon landings which both took place in 1969. The juxtaposition of nursery rhymes and science fiction included performers and animals costumed as “space aliens” with huge orange wings, all marching to the beat of Merle Evans’ band playing a selection from Sergei Prokofiev’s opera “The Love for Three Oranges.”⁵⁴

As the Red Unit began moving up the east coast, the Blue Unit completed rehearsals and premiered in Venice on March 14. In only a matter of weeks, an entirely new circus was created. Looking back 50 years Elvin Bale remembered the affinity that Irvin Feld had for the new show. “He truly loved the Blue Unit. It was his baby. He built it.”⁵⁵

The circus opened with a rousing grand entry titled “Hoop-te-do” that showcased the clown alley, and although

the opening was new there were several displays repeated from the 1968 show including the Carnaby Street menage number and the aerial ballet titled “Winter Wonderland” that had been reinvigorated with the appearance of Elvin Bale who performed to the strains of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. “The Inaugural Ball” spec created during the election year of 1968 was now outdated and was replaced with a display titled “Alice in Way Out Wonderland.”

“It was a great show. Well put together and well balanced,” said Sarah Chapman. “We had such great performers, all across the board.”⁵⁶

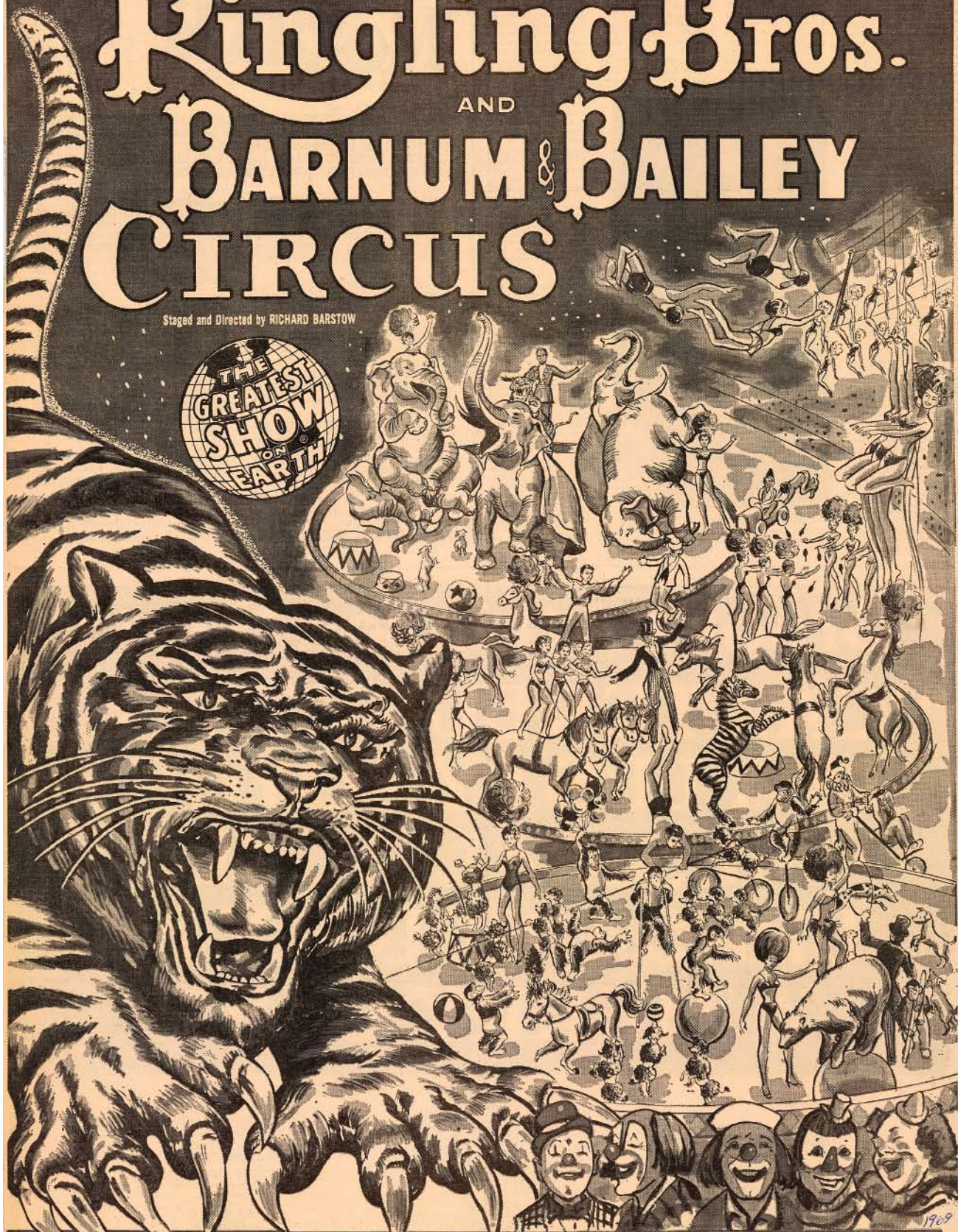
After three days of performances in Venice, the new 20-car Blue Unit train was blessed by Reverend Edward Sullivan and began its maiden tour enroute to Knoxville. No sooner had the journey started than it came to a halt. As the train was traveling through downtown Sarasota at about 15 to 20 miles per hour the locomotive derailed, leaving the tracks

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and plowing into two empty freight cars. Fortunately, only the engine derailed, and although there were no injuries, the circus train was delayed for several hours until a new locomotive could be dispatched to the railyard.⁵⁷

At the same time that the Blue Unit was opening in Venice, the Red Unit was making its first appearance at Madison Square Garden, where the highest priced tickets sold for \$7.50. Among those in attendance was John Ringling North, who was still listed in the program as Producer of the show. "We heard he was in the audience and I spotted him from far away," Fudi the juggler recalled, "but he did not come to the back door or say anything to the performers."⁵⁸

For years the New York engagement had coincided with Easter, and in 1969 for the entire week leading up to the holiday the circus played three shows a day. "Those were long days," recalled Fudi. "At the old Garden, the Belvidere Hotel was across the street so we could run there between shows to rest. At the new Garden the hotel was too far, and sometimes we would try to find a place to sleep for just a half an hour in order to get some rest."⁵⁹

The New York Times praised the opening performance by saying, "This year's show is the freshest, snappiest, and fastest-paced circus to come to town in several years,"⁶⁰ a sentiment echoed by a reporter for *Variety* who was also on hand for the first New York performance:

"The circus has attained a completely new look, and the result is a faster layout, greater interest in the acts and outlook for even greater box office during this six-week stay at the new and larger Madison Square Garden.

"Unlike when as many as seven acts were performing at the same time, the current show never has more than three. It is a compromise between the old Ringling standard and the European version where only one act is viewed at a time. With only three on board the eye can reasonably absorb more of the offerings. What's more, it seems to make more sense in presentation."

The review also showered praise on Gunther Gebel-Williams who was described as "charismatic" and said to be "one of the more showmanly animal handlers of this era and with a sense of performance not recalled since the early days of Clyde Beatty."⁶¹

Years later publicist Jack Ryan spoke of the impact that the German animal trainer had toward fulfilling Irvin Feld's vision. "When Gunther showed up in 1969, I knew he was the future of the circus," Ryan said. "And in just a few years,

This full-page newspaper ad promoted the 41-day engagement in New York. When the Red Unit opened at Madison Square Garden, it was praised as "the snappiest and fastest paced circus to come to town in several years."

Circus World Museum

'Gunther' was an answer in *The New York Times* crossword, so I guess I did my job."⁶²

The night before the circus opened in New York millions of Americans tuned to NBC for the annual broadcast *Highlights of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*. The program, which had been taped while the Red Unit was in Baltimore, was hosted by Arthur Godfrey, who not only introduced the acts, but also demonstrated his talents as an accomplished dressage rider as he put his horse Goldie through her paces. Although the production seems primitive by today's standards, it was innovative at the time, using the same new techniques that viewers were beginning to see on television sporting events. Not only was there an instant replay of Gunther Gebel-Williams soaring from a teeterboard onto the back of an elephant, but Tito Gaona was also shown in slow-motion as he performed his triple somersault blindfolded. "It was the first time I had seen that," he recalled. "It was very exciting to see the trick played back in slow motion."⁶³

In addition to the tremendous promotional value provided by the hour-long program, it was also a money maker. According to *Variety*, NBC paid the circus \$300,000 for the 1969 *Highlights* special, with the network making its profit through the sale of premium rate commercials.⁶⁴

After the television program was taped at the Baltimore Civic Center, the circus train took a short trip to Washington, D.C., hometown to Irvin and Israel Feld. On the day before the show opened its 18-day stand at the Washington Coliseum, the new First Lady, Pat Nixon, attended a private performance along with 6,300 underprivileged children. While at the show she was joined in the stands by Prince Paul and Lou Jacobs who spent much of the first half entertaining the children who were seated near the First Lady. As she was leaving, Mrs. Nixon said it was her first circus in five years. "I enjoyed it," she said. "It was a great show."⁶⁵

When the Red Unit arrived in New York on April 1 it had already been on the road for four months, yet the new Blue show was only two weeks into its maiden tour. From Venice, the first stop was Knoxville and the response at the box office was tremendous.

"The Feld brothers were very much on top of the revenue," recalled Don Hintz, who traveled ahead of the show doing promotions, and then would double back to the arena when the circus arrived. His responsibility in 1969 included managing ticket sales and dealing with any last-minute issues. "We made a phone call to Washington every day and spoke with either Allen Bloom, Israel Feld or [controller] Chuck Smith. They wanted to know how many tickets were sold and how much revenue we had."⁶⁶

During the five days that the circus was at the Knoxville Coliseum, 51,250 attended the show. According to the Coliseum's executive director Fred McCallum, the ten performances grossed \$153,900 with the highest priced ticket selling for \$3.75. McCallum said that ticket sales during the



The Red Unit featured sensational displays of juggling, including the Lilla Sextet (seen here), along with Fudi and Ugo Garrido.

Robert Handley photograph

five-day stand were twice what the circus had ever grossed at his arena.⁶⁷

Even before the first ticket was sold in Knoxville, another initiative was announced that was structured to generate even more revenue for the circus. For the first time since James A. Bailey had sold shares of stock at the turn of the century, the public would be given the opportunity to purchase a piece of *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

On February 11, 1969, Roy Hofheinz along with Irvin and Israel Feld, announced their plan to offer 346,000 shares of stock to the public. The prospectus, filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, said that the initial offering would be no more than \$17.50 a share, and that the three partners would continue to own 1.5 million shares of the nearly 1.9 million that would be outstanding after the company went public.

The filing also revealed that the circus had been struggling financially under John Ringling North's leadership. According to the financial statement, the circus lost money in both 1964 and 1965, but made a small profit of \$193,691 in 1966 and \$125,318 in 1967.⁶⁸

By essentially opening its books for the first time, would-be investors learned that total income for the circus had grown from \$5,875,491 in 1964 to a record \$10,786,227 in 1968, the first year that the Felds and Hofheinz operated the circus. In addition, the prospectus stated that nearly all of the company's net income was derived from the annual appearance at Madison Square Garden. The gross income at

Madison Square Garden in 1968 was \$3,316,050 which was a little more than half of the entire profit that season. After the show left New York in 1968, the rest of the tour generated another \$7,037,547 with television royalties and other income totaling \$432,630.

The prospectus also revealed ambitious plans for the future of the company. According to the SEC filing, the capital raised by the public offering would be used to pay off \$2.4 million in debt with the remainder to be used for the development of five new subsidiaries that would focus on fast food, music publishing, television production, recordings and franchised motor inns. Each of the proposed new businesses would carry the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey name.⁶⁹

As with all such public filings, details were also provided on the company's various assets and liabilities. Even though Gargantua II, the 19-year old 700-pound gorilla was rarely exhibited, he was still carried on the book at a value of \$120,000, more than one-fifth of the \$496,434 that the circus had invested in its animals. The prospectus also revealed that the circus paid the City of Venice \$9,500 a year as rental for the 15-acre winter quarters, and that it still owned a five-acre tract in Peru, Indiana that was worth \$12,500, property that John Ringling had acquired when he purchased the American Circus Corporation in 1929.⁷⁰

In early June, the initial offering was priced at \$14.00 a share and for the first time, circus fans and investors began buying a piece of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Com-

bined Shows, Inc. In exchange, they received an attractive stock certificate that was one of the first ever to be produced in four-colors.⁷¹ At the end of the year, the circus distributed two annual reports for its stockholders. One was a standard report which contained the required financial information, and the second was written to be understood by children. The easy to read report was praised as an imaginative explanation of stock ownership and hundreds of complimentary copies were shipped to schools across the country. According to the circus, about half of its stockholders were under the age of 21.

Although the original plan to create businesses as diverse as fast-food and motels never came to fruition, the corporation did grant licenses to various manufacturers who produced products using the circus name and trademark. In addition, a new logo was created that was painted on circus wagons and printed on some promotional material. The design featured four cartoon characters: "Ring" a gorilla, "Ling" a tiger, "Baby Barnum" an elephant, and "Bumble Bailey" a clown. Costumes were also created for all four of the characters, and each of them would appear at various times during the performances of both shows.⁷²

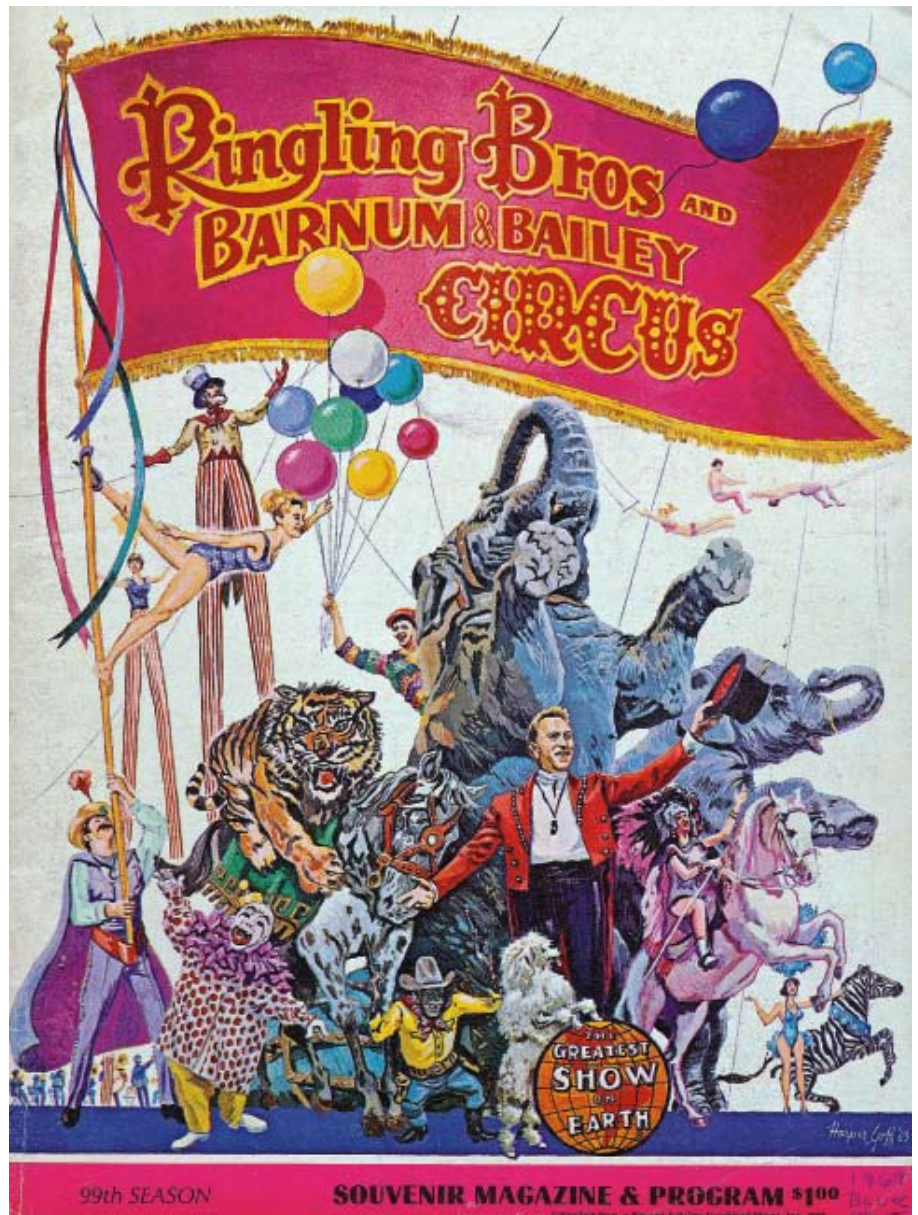
The new look for the circus also extended to the 1969 program which was slightly larger than that which had been sold in previous years. The cover was created by Harper Goff, an extraordinary artist and designer who not only helped develop camouflage for the U. S. Army during World War II, but was a long-time associate of Walt Disney. Goff had been an important designer in the development of Disneyland, and he was working with Judge Hofheinz on his Astroworld amusement park when he was commissioned to create the program cover that was used for both the Red and Blue Units.

For a number of years the program book had been published by Harry Dube, who had purchased the rights from John Ringling North. Dube had a long history with North, and when the circus went into arenas in 1957, he and the Felds were among those who booked many of the indoor engagements. With the 1969 season approaching, Irvin Feld bought back the rights from Dube and Jack Ryan was given the job of putting together the magazine.

"I wrote the copy and the graphics were done by the Blaine-Thompson ad agency in New York," Ryan recalled. "The

same feature articles were carried in both editions of the program, with the only change being several pages on the inside which had the program of displays specific to either the Red or Blue Unit." Ryan pointed out that the quality of the magazine in 1969 was inferior to what it would later become. "If you check the Red Program, you will notice that all photos of Gunther, Jeanette Williams, the Rudi Lenz Chimps and Pio Nock were black and white shots taken in Europe," he said. "The books went to press long before the acts arrived in the U.S.A."⁷³

As Ryan was scrambling to put together the program book, he was told to create a closing message to replace John Ringling North's "Thank you and au revoir" that had been used for many years. "I thought, and I thought, and I thought, and I made a couple of tries that didn't work." Fi-



The 1969 program was written by Jack Ryan with cover art by Harper Goff. The editorial content was the same in both editions, the only difference being the listing of acts for the two separate units.

Circus World Museum



The Blue Unit featured High School horses, presented by Franz and Evy Althoff along with Lillemore Moller, the niece of Trolle and Ingeborg Rhodin.

Robert Handley photograph

nally, he had an idea, “I didn’t like it because the word “days” was repeated, but what could I do?” When Irvin Feld asked what the closing line would be, Ryan responded, “May all your days be circus days.”

The initial response by other Ringling officials had been lukewarm according to Ryan. He said he was told that it would be used in 1969, with an eye toward coming up with something better. However, over time it took hold. The slogan, which has since been used in thousands of circus performances around the world, came about because of a printer’s deadline. “We used it because we had nothing else.” From the premiere in 1969 until the final goodbye on May 21, 2017, a version of “May All Your Days Be Circus Days” concluded each Ringling performance.⁷⁴

The Red Unit program of 1969 described 35 acts as either “First Time in America” or “First Time Anywhere,” and when the circus reached the Boston Garden for a 14-day stand one of the new acts that was singled out was The Great Fattini, a comic sway-pole acrobat who performed on the hippodrome track next to the third ring. “Fattini has a cigar in his mouth and needs a light,” the *Boston Globe* said. “Towering above him is a swaying street lamp, maybe 50 feet high. It has a flame inside its glass dome at the top. Fattini slithers up the pole that seems to tilt at the slightest touch. He bends with it, left and right, low and high. He lights his

cigar, has a nip or two from a flask and settles down to a dizzy night, always very close to the edge of a terrifying drop to the floor.”⁷⁵

Although Fattini’s act was well-received throughout the season, there was nearly a disaster while the show was in Baltimore. As the act was concluding, the sway-pole collapsed, crashing within three feet of the bandstand and scattering glass. Despite the excitement, Merle Evans and the band reportedly did not miss a beat, though an observer said that when the first half ended, “a few shaken musicians probably sought a quick drink for their nerves.”⁷⁶

“Merle did a great job,” Tito Gaona recalled. “He always had real traditional music.” Still, after 50 years the veteran bandmaster was growing weary. Although he did not announce his retirement until after the season had ended, letters that he wrote to circus fans in 1969 suggest that the grind was taking its toll. Unlike the early days when he had a full band for the entire season, each town brought a new group who he would lead in the three-hour performance, often three times a day, and always standing up.

“There were no local musicians available when we were in Fayetteville, North Carolina,” recalled Scott Bryan. With limited options, musicians were recruited from nearby Fort Bragg. “For an army band they were not very good. They really had trouble playing the circus music.”



The Red Unit train consisted of 25 cars and was made up of 14 coaches/sleepers, four stock cars and seven tunnel cars. It is shown in this photograph unloading in Chicago.

John Goodall photograph, Circus World Museum

Still, the veteran bandleader put a positive spin on his work. "Things are much better now playing in auditoriums. I would never go back to those tents, and if tents come back," he said, "I'll write home for money." During a rehearsal in Washington he said, "I'm 75 years old and I've been around longer than anybody, and I'm going to hang around unless they fire me."⁷⁷

One thing that had changed little since Evans performed under canvas was life on the circus train. In 1969, about 300 people lived on each of the two trains. Although the trains stretched for nearly half a mile, each of them was only 9½ feet wide inside, which provided its own challenges. As Merle's wife, circus paymaster Nena Evans put it, "It's a way of life. You learn to measure space in inches instead of feet. But it is better than living out of a suitcase."⁷⁸

Because of their longevity on the show, the Evans' were among the lucky ones. Scott Bryan remembers life on the Red Unit train after he graduated from Clown College. "We shared a car with the candy butchers. There were 12 bunks for the clowns and the butchers were at the other end," he recalled. "There was no heat or air conditioning and to get to the pie car we had to walk through the butcher's compartment, and then through the workingmen's car which was three bunks high. The smell in that car was so bad you had to hold your breath."

Occasionally Bryan was able to venture into other parts of the train, including the stateroom of clown Bobby Kaye. "In many ways Bobby was my guardian angel. He knew I was saving up my money to go back to school and many a Friday night after we got paid Bobby would invite me to his stateroom for dinner. He was a total gentleman to me, and he would cook delicious dinners in what was really more like an efficiency apartment than a stateroom."

Still, even staying warm was sometimes difficult on the train. "We were in Georgia and Lou Jacobs told me how cold he was," Bryan recalled. "I mentioned that I had an extra wool blanket if he would like it, and when I took it to his stateroom, I realized that despite his status with the circus, his living space was the same size as Bobby Kaye's, only not as nice. Lou was traveling alone that season, and he slept on what looked like an army bunk. His only luxury was a black and white television with rabbit ears for an antenna."

If the new Blue Unit train was an improvement over that on the Red show, space was also at a premium there. "When I first came on the show, they had me rooming with someone," ringmaster Bob Welz recalled. "I called Allen Bloom and he was able to get me into my own stateroom, but compared to a hotel room it was tiny. All of the performers had very small living spaces unless you were a really big star."⁷⁹

Among those pressed for space was Elvin Bale, who

had first lived on the circus train when he was growing up. "The new train was much better," he recalled. "They gave me a stateroom, but it was small. I slept in the top bunk and had storage on the bottom. I lived on the train until I got to Houston when I asked Mr. Feld if I could buy a trailer."⁸⁰

Elvin Bale was not the only one who moved off the train when the show got to Houston on May 30. After two and a half months on the road, the circus spent the next 13 weeks at Astrohalls, the longest single stand in the history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. During the summer of 1969, quite a few people found short-term apartments not far from the arena.

Astrophall was located in the same complex as the Astrodome and the Astro World amusement park, all of which was built by former Houston mayor and judge Roy Hofheinz prior to his investment in the circus. Although the circus had played at the Astrodome from 1965 through 1968, the enormous stadium was too big for the show. By putting the circus into the new 9,400-seat Astrophall, the building had a tenant for the entire summer and the new show did not have to settle for marginal bookings or go on hiatus during its inaugural season.

Some of those who were there for that long engagement remembered many performances where only a few hundred people were in attendance, yet the Felds and Hofheinz had structured a deal where the circus made money even if the building was empty. According to *Variety*, the Houston Sports Association, which had leased the building from Hofheinz, guaranteed the circus \$61,500 for a seven-day week, plus 50% of any weekly gross above \$100,000. The Sports Association would only make money after the circus was paid its weekly fee. With \$800,000 guaranteed to the circus over 13-weeks, and with no transportation expense, the

circus was poised to make a tidy profit that summer.⁸¹

Despite the favorable arrangement, Hofheinz wanted to expose the circus to as many people as possible while it was in his hometown. One promotion designed to lure Texans to the entertainment center was a discounted ticket that included a circus ticket and program, a ticket to an Astros home baseball game and a tour of the Astrodome, all for ten dollars.⁸²

With the Blue Unit locked in place in Houston, the Red Unit continued its tour. After the show finished its stand in Oklahoma City and the train was enroute to Dallas, Fudi and a group of performers from the Red show decided to drive to Houston to see the Blue Unit. "We had a 1957 Ford that we were driving from city to city," the juggler recalled. "A group of us wanted to see the new show, visit some of the acts that we had performed with previously, and drive back in time for the Dallas opening." Looking back 50 years Fudi said that he was impressed with the Blue Unit performance at Astrophall, especially the production numbers which seemed more organized, and the costumes which were nicer than in previous seasons.⁸³

Still, it was not just new costumes that were getting attention in Houston. Hofheinz, a long-time circus fan, added a menagerie at Astrophall and brought Gargantua II from Venice to Houston in his air-conditioned circus wagon. In

addition, various sideshow acts were contracted including a sword swallower named Francis Doran who nearly died on June 15. In a news story that was published from coast-to-coast, readers learned of the mishap that occurred when Doran was swallowing a 36-inch red neon tube. As he was midway through his act the tube exploded in front of an audience of about 200 and Doran was rushed to the hospital.



Blue Unit Ringmaster Robert Welz stopped the performance when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon. The circus was in Houston, home to NASA's Mission Control.

Greg Parkinson collection



From 1968 until 2008 the Spectrum was where Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey played in Philadelphia. The indoor arena, which hosted the Red Unit in 1969, was built on the same lot where Cecil B. DeMille filmed portions of *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1951.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

Although doctors originally doubted he would survive, the sword swallower from Gibsonton, Florida was released from the hospital before the end of the Houston engagement.⁸⁴

A more remarkable and historic event occurred at Astrohall on July 20, as remembered by ringmaster Bob Welz. "I just went out there, blew my whistle, and made a brief announcement. I stopped the show for a minute and said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, we have just achieved the greatest moment in the history of the world. A man has landed on the moon!' and the audience cheered."⁸⁵

Sarah Chapman was with a group of performers backstage when Welz made that announcement. "Someone had rigged up a small black and white television in the backstage area, and when Bob made the announcement all of the performers gathered around that television set. We talked to each other about the fact that even though we were wire walkers and trapeze artists who risked our lives each day, these astronauts had walked on the moon, and we were merely circus performers. What a place to witness history, in Houston, the home of Mission Control."

Meanwhile 1,500 miles away at the San Diego Sports Arena a similar scene was unfolding. Fudi, the Hungarian juggler, was among a group watching the coverage in sleeper car number 48, home for some of the unmarried male performers, many of whom were from Eastern Europe. "We had a very bad television connection, so we could see some of it, but not everything," he recalled. "It was a great accomplishment, and the Hungarians, Poles and Bulgarians were all very happy that the Americans had beat the Russians to the moon."

Jeanette Williams was also caught up in the moment. "I almost missed the opening that night," she said. "I was in my

trailer watching on my little television because I wanted to see history."

The Apollo 11 mission was not the only major news story in 1969. The war in Vietnam was also heating up, and Scott Bryan was in California when he received his draft notice. "When the show was in San Diego, I learned that I needed to go to Los Angeles to get an extension," he said. "Jack Ryan wanted me to wear my clown makeup for my meeting with the draft board, but I wouldn't do it."⁸⁶ Despite taking a pre-induction physical, his number did not come up in the lottery and he was not drafted.

The war was also fueling numerous protests in 1969, including on the campus of the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Only days before the Blue Unit arrived at the Dane County Coliseum, 16,000 antiwar demonstrators marched through the city, demanding an end to the war. When the show arrived a couple of days later, ringmaster Bob Welz came face-to-face with student activism. "I met a college girl who was working concessions at the arena," he recalled. "I took her out that night and as we were eating pizza she said, 'I hate everything that America stands for.' I remember being very shocked that someone would say that."⁸⁷

The Red Unit spent six weeks in California, including three stands in the Los Angeles area; one of which was The Forum in Inglewood where the Lakers played basketball. "The clowns dressed in the Lakers dressing room, and I took Jerry West's spot," Scott Bryant recalled, but the privilege was temporary. "Luis de Jesus had a relative in El Monte and as he was looking at a map to figure out the best way to get there, I lit it on fire. He dropped the map and it burned the carpet badly. We tried to cover it up with baby powder, but from then on the clowns had to dress in a hallway."⁸⁸



Evy Althoff and her dappled Arabian stallion were featured on the Blue Unit along with a 500-pound Siberian tiger that rode the horse in each performance.

Robert Handley photograph

‘slap me’ and I did.”

As the other clowns were scrambling to get to the arena, Bryan remembered a tip that Prince Paul had once given him. “He said ‘when in doubt drop your pants...’ so I did!”⁸⁹

The audience was never told about the escaped tiger, but the police in the building responded with rifles and were preparing to kill it when Gebel-Williams convinced them that the situation was under control. Although the tiger was captured, it was not without bloodshed. Five horses were injured, one badly.⁹⁰

Once the shows reached the west coast, the distance between some of the cities became measured in days rather than hours. In 1969, Jeanette Williams was one of several performers who chose to travel overland rather than by train. “I had a trailer and I drove from town to town, and sometimes I had to drive hundreds of miles overnight,” she recalled. “It was especially challenging because I had to be there when the horses were unloaded from the train.”⁹¹

That first season in America Rudi and Sue Lenz were also getting accustomed to the distance between cities. “Some of those jumps were pretty long but fortunately gasoline was cheap,” Sue recalled. “It was always so expensive in England and we couldn’t believe how cheap it was. I remember when we were at the Cow Palace in San Francisco gasoline was 25 cents a gallon, and we got double Green Stamps!”⁹²

After the long Houston stand both Elvin Bale and Bob Welz also decided to give up life on the train for the open road. “Even though the train had been rebuilt, there wasn’t a lot of air in my stateroom and I seemed to be spending most of my time on the vestibule, so I bought a trailer,” said Bale.⁹³ Although Welz continued sleeping on the train, when the show was moving he would drive to the next town in a 1967 Mustang. “Elvin, Manfred Fritsch [The Great Doval], and I were like the Three Musketeers. Once we would get to a new town we would use my car to party after the show.”⁹⁴

The first Blue Unit jump from Houston was a long one, 1,438 miles to Salt Lake City where the circus was making its

After dates in Long Beach and Anaheim the Red Unit train began the trip from Southern California to Oakland, hugging the Pacific coast on tracks that were then operated by the Santa Fe Railway. The circus was delayed because of the derailment of another train and did not arrive at the 85th Avenue yards until late on the night of August 21. The animals were then walked about a mile to the Oakland Coliseum.

During a performance the next day, one of Gunther Gebel-Williams’ tigers escaped in the animal tent, outside of the arena. “Clown alley was set up about two football fields away from the Coliseum,” Scott Bryan recalled,

“Eric Braun and I were the only clowns in the building. All of the sudden we see Gunther and Henry Schroer running past us and [Performance Director] Bob Dover shouting ‘A tiger is loose! Walkaround!’ Merle Evans started playing the emergency music, but Eric and I were the only clowns in the ring. I said to Eric, ‘What should we do?’ he said,



The Red Unit appeared at the University of Illinois Assembly Hall in September of 1969. The building was managed by former Billboard "Circus Editor" and CHS President Tom Parkinson.

Robert Handley photograph

first appearance since 1958. Places like Salt Lake City, were proof of Irvin Feld's theory that the circus could now visit towns that had not been on the itinerary for many years, including South Bend, Amarillo and a month-long tour of western Canada.

Vancouver was the first stop north of the border, a city which had not seen Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey since 1939. In reviewing the show, a Canadian newspaper said that "while the circus loses something of its glamor by being indoors, it is still *The Greatest Show on Earth*."⁵⁵

One of the acts that was singled out in Vancouver was Evy Althoff's horseback riding tiger. "The horse is not scared of the tiger and the tiger knows the horse," she said. "But if the horse slips and the tiger falls off, I must get him (the tiger) right back up again. It's just like people getting back on the horse after the fall. If we didn't get him up right away I would have trouble later."⁵⁶

When the circus had performed under canvas it had been forced to move south each autumn when temperatures dropped, but with routes that were now entirely indoors, the season was extended, and the circus trains followed an itinerary that zigzagged across North America. From October through November of 1969, the Red Unit moved from Min-

neapolis and Chicago to Charlotte, Cleveland and Buffalo. The Blue Unit remained in the upper Midwest, re-entering the United States from Canada in Duluth, followed by dates in Milwaukee, Madison, Omaha and closing at the Cobo Arena in Detroit on November 16.

Even though the circus was exhibiting day-and-date against the Ice Follies starring Peggy Fleming, the promotion in Detroit which was handled by Don Hintz generated sold out performances as the season came to a close. "All season long we made deals to promote the circus with radio and television stations, car dealerships and fast food restaurants," he recalled. "When the trains headed for Venice, I pulled out my checkbook, paid the final bills and shook hands with everybody at the arena. It was important to establish a rapport with the local managers as it made it much easier when we returned the next year."

Compared to the 11-months that the Red Unit toured in 1969 the Blue show was only out for five and a half months, allowing it to return to winter quarters first and begin preparing for the 100th anniversary season. As the plans were being made for the centennial edition, a number of acts were told they would shift to the Blue Unit the following year, including The Flying Gaonas, Otto Griebeling and ring-



Several cast members from the Blue Unit were flown to New York for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1969. Charly Baumann rode a float in the parade which also featured clowns and the four costumed cartoon characters that the circus had introduced that season.

Sarah Chapman collection

"Cold! Boy it was cold that day, and windy! We played 'Auld Lang Syne' as usual and they stopped the show and announced it was the last day of the season. Then we played the exit march, I always called it 'The Chaser,' to get 'em out. They took a lot of pictures, but there was nothing unusual. No announcement about it being my last stand after fifty years. Nobody thought it was. They still thought and hoped I'd be back, but I thought it was a good time to step down."⁹⁷

Although those on the show were eager to get back to the sunshine of Florida, the departure was delayed by the blizzard, and it took nearly four days before the train reached the Seaboard Coast Line siding along Center Road in Venice. During the 1969 season, the Red Unit had traveled 16,816 miles, playing most of the nation's largest cities.

Once the Red Unit train arrived in Venice, the animal population was doubled. The animals from the Blue show had returned on November 19 and were already occupying the elephant barn and other permanent facilities. As a result, special tents were put up to hold the additional herd of elephants along with dozens of horses and ponies that had been traveling with the Red Unit.⁹⁸

With both shows back in quarters, the grounds were buzzing in preparation for the 100th anniversary. Clown College was already in session with a new class that included the first three female students, and new acts that had been hired were reporting for rehearsals.

Shortly before the season ended, Irvin Feld announced that the circus had reached an agreement with the NBC television network to move the *Highlights of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey* from its traditional spring broadcast to January. Because the program would be seen much earlier than in previous years, the taping would be necessary dur-

master Harold Ronk.

"They told me before the end of the season that I would be going to the Red Unit," remembered Bob Welz. "When we closed in Detroit, Irvin Feld sent me to Utica, New York so that I could observe the show for a couple of weeks." While he was there, Welz watched the performance from the bandstand where he was able to talk to Merle Evans. "He had a lot of interesting stories and I was amazed watching him play the cornet for three hours, holding his horn in one hand and leading the band with the other."

None of those at that final performance on November 30 knew that Merle would announce his retirement just a few weeks later. Evans' last appearance with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey occurred during a heavy snowstorm, similar to his first show at Madison Square Garden March 29, 1919, a day when New York City had also felt the brunt of a powerful winter storm.

Years later Merle spoke of that final show in Utica:

The 1969 season laid the foundation for bigger spectacles, more lavish costumes and sensational performances that defined the Feld era. When this photograph was taken in 1971, Gunther Gebel-Williams was well on his way to becoming the most recognized American circus performer in decades.

The Ringling Museum,
Tibbals Circus Collection

ing the show's appearance at the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg.

As part of the new television agreement, the circus was also given the opportunity to have a float in the 1969 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade which was broadcast by NBC. The circus had originally planned to take elephants to New York for the parade, however, that plan was scrapped after a series of department store bombings, as officials feared that such an attack could cause a stampede on the crowded streets.⁹⁹

The weather that Thanksgiving Day was picture perfect as a group of Ringling clowns tumbled in the streets and appeared on a float with tiger trainer Charly Baumann. In addition, the circus cartoon characters made their first national television appearance, with clown Joey Matheson as the gorilla, Alvin "Schwartzie" Schwartz as the elephant and Kathy Pruyn as the clown. Sarah Chapman also appeared in the parade as the tiger. "I overdid it," she recalled. "I did cartwheels all throughout the parade route." Chapman said the appearance in the parade was a tremendous morale boost. "It was a great ending for the first season Blue Unit and a great preview for the centennial."¹⁰⁰

Even before the season closed, the circus reported record revenues and earnings for the nine-month period that ended September 30. Revenue for the 1969 season during the first three quarters of the year was \$13,256,130, a 40% increase over the same period in 1968. In his report to shareholders, Irvin Feld noted that much of the increase was directly tied to the new Blue Unit, which had increased the number of cities played from 36 to 56 during the first nine months of the year. Feld also said that during its first six months of operation the increased revenues had fully covered the cost of building the new show.¹⁰¹

By any measure, the 1969 season was one of the most



important in the history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. In a matter of months Irvin Feld had not only set the stage for a new era of the circus, but he also became firmly established as a creative visionary who operated at the intersection of entertainment and business. "He was a genius," Elvin Bale recalled.¹⁰²

"When I told my people that we were going to have two shows they thought I was crazy," Feld told the *New York Times*. Yet in what seemed like a blink of an eye, three rings became six, one train became two and 150 performers became 300. The circus was now able to reach cities that had not been on the itinerary in decades, and Wall Street promoted a 99-year old business as a new investment.

Still the *Times* reporter was skeptical. "Of the Blue Unit and the Red Unit, which is truly *The Greatest Show on Earth*?" Feld was asked.

"Both," he said without hesitation.¹⁰³

And he believed it. **BW**

Acknowledgements

This article could not have been written without the personal recollections of those who were a part of *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1969. It is my hope that our candid conversations have given the reader an assessment of the historic season from a variety of perspectives. I am especially grateful to Elvin Bale, Scott Bryan, Sarah Chapman, Kenneth Feld, Tito Gaona, Sigrid Gebel, Joseph Guzman, Don Hintz, Sue Lenz, Rev. Bill Minson, Bill Powell, Mary Gill St. Leon, Victoria Unus, Bob Welz, Jeanette Williams and Gyorgy "Fudi" Zsilak. Additional thanks to Bill Armstrong, Robert Handley, Kim Anthony Jones, Peter Shrake and Steven Yaros.

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Rosalie Hoffman photograph, Circus World Museum

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In One Era and Out Another

Letters from Merle Evans – 1969

Researched and edited by Chris Berry

It has been 50 years since Merle Evans closed out his career with The Greatest Show on Earth, and a century since he first led the group of musicians who played at the inaugural performance of the Combined Shows in 1919.

During his nearly five decades with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Merle was an eyewitness to the evolution of the circus, viewed from his unique perspective, perched on the bandstand.

From Leitzel to Gunther, Merle arranged and played the marches and waltzes that set the scene and provided the backdrop for thousands of performances. In doing so, he did his part to define the circus for generations of Americans. Except for a musician's strike in 1942 and a brief retirement from 1955 to 1961, Merle Evans never missed a performance.

In his 42 years with the circus, Merle became a passionate letter writer who corresponded with dozens of circus fans across the country, including Sverre Braathen, the Madison, Wisconsin attorney whose archives are now preserved at Illinois State University's Milner Library. The two began their letter-writing in 1930 and maintained it for 45 years, the correspondence ending upon the death of Braathen in 1974.

On this, the 100th anniversary of Merle's first performance with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and the 50th anniversary of his last, letters which Merle Evans sent to Sverre Braathen in 1969, his final year with the circus, provide a first-person narrative on a season that was, in many ways, as significant as his first in 1919. The contributions that Merle Evans made to the circus during that 50-year span cannot be overestimated.



Fifty years after he first took the bandstand, Merle Evans retired at the end of the 1969 season. When this photograph was taken in 1922, the enormous big top required a big band, and a big bass drum.

Circus World Museum

**Friday December 29, 1968 –
Sarasota, Florida**

Everything is going OK here. Rehearsals are ahead of other years and this new aerial rigging is something. I saw it in operation today. They had 16 girls on it...it will get a lot of pub. The Unus family is back this season.

We open January 6th in Venice with six shows, and the advance sale is very good. I will rehearse over the weekend for three hours or more, depending on how we get along. We will use 13 local men in Venice. With me, the organ and drummer, we will have 16 men in the band. In Miami, we will use 18 local men.

I hear we will play the new Garden this year. The new route cards will be out January 5th.

**Friday January 10, 1969 –
St. Petersburg, Florida**

We closed last night in Venice after six shows and good biz. We will open here tonight with three shows Saturday and close on Monday, with a total of eight shows.

The music we are playing is hard, especially the production numbers. The local bands will all have trouble because the music is too long and hard.

The show this season runs over three hours. Because of the length, I told the bosses they would have to pay the band overtime, so yesterday they took out three displays to keep at under three hours. They are now doubling up the acts, and we have too many, including two high wire acts.

This Gunther Gebel-Williams is great. He does four acts and if he gets sick, I don't know what will happen.

The Blue Unit will have 20 railcars. The train being refurbished in Venice and they still have a lot of work to do.

Wed. February 5, 1969 – Greenville, South Carolina

Bill Pruyn will have the band on the Blue Show. There were 125 applicants and after they finally got it down to ten I went over all of them with Mr. Feld. Bill was the best of the lot, and he made the deal with Mr. Feld while the show



From 1919 until 1969, Evans was a constant on the circus bandstand, and for decades many of the greatest acts in America performed to the arrangements that he created for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

Circus World Museum

was in Miami. His wife will play the organ, but I am afraid she will have trouble rehearsing with [director Richard] Barstow. He's rough, and from what he says, I don't think he likes women musicians.

The show made an overnight jump from Orlando and opened the next night and we will do the same here in Greenville. We will close Thursday night and open Friday night in Columbia. I will have a 4:00 P.M. rehearsal tomorrow and then we will give three shows on Saturday. We will give three shows almost every Saturday, and during Easter Week in New York we will give three shows a day. That will be rough. The show still runs three hours and we have not played the chaser yet.



After the circus moved indoors, only Evans, his drummer and an organ player traveled with the show as other members of the band were recruited through unions for each new town. This photograph was taken in 1969 at the University of Illinois Assembly Hall in Champaign, Illinois.

Robert Handley photograph

The music on the show this season is harder than ever. In fact, this is the hardest program that I have ever played. I have had only one band that can play it and that was Miami. The contracted band in Orlando was the worst ever and they couldn't even begin to play the show.

Bill will have some bad bands in the places where he will play. They are sure going to play some tank towns, and I am glad I'm not with that show.

Wednesday March 5, 1969 – Baltimore, Maryland

Rehearsals started today for the TV special. Taping will be on Monday and Tuesday, and those days will be long and hard. We will be using 20 men for the television taping and it is a good band.

So far, our business has only been fair, but it should pick up over the weekend.

We are hearing nothing about the Blue Unit. The new show will open in Venice Friday March 14th. Barstow will be here on Sunday for the television taping, so I should know more then.

I hope the Blue Unit band will play circus style, but Bill Pruyn wants a dance band, so we will see. His arrangement calls for five saxophones, no clarinet or piccolo, and he won't be using a baritone horn. I believe he will use five saxes, five trumpets, two trombones and a bass. With that instrumentation, I don't think you have a circus band.

Sunday March 16, 1969 – Washington, DC

I have been on the go after we completed the TV special last Monday and Tuesday in Baltimore. I think it should be our best.

Arthur Godfrey was great. He sang two songs, did a

number with his horse and he can act. I had a dandy band made up of 20 men. I think this will be one of the better bands that I will get for the year. The television special will be shown Monday May 26th, at 8 P.M. Eastern Time.

We opened here in Washington on Thursday for 40 shows. We are giving three shows on each Saturday and that is rough. I have worked three shows every Saturday since we opened.

The Blue Unit opened Friday in Venice and we hear it went over OK. It is the same show we had last year.

Barstow told me in Baltimore that Bill Pruyn would not play galops during the show, and the closest thing he played to a galop was *Get Me to the Church on Time*. Rudy Bundy will be back with us tomorrow and I will get the dope on the band.

Here in Washington we are paying high rates for the union musicians. They are getting \$32.00 per show and for third show on Saturday \$48. Yesterday each man made \$112. Each of them will make nearly \$500 per week and that ain't hay.

Monday March 24, 1969 – Washington DC

We are on our last week here, and when it is over we will have played 40 shows.

I have a dandy band here. All of the musicians have been in military bands. I heard the Navy Band last Wednesday and they were very good. I will hear the Marine and Air Force Band this week.

From what I hear, Bill Pruyn is doing OK. I am glad as I recommended both he and his drummer. His music is different than what I use, and he is more like a dance band. Bill likes a lot of saxes and trumpets and not much on trombones. He doesn't care for baritones.

The show is going to play 13-weeks this summer in Houston. Maybe I'm wrong but I don't see how they can do business for that long.

We went to a party last night at Mr. Feld's home with about 20 of the staff. What a place he has.

It looks like we will have some days off in New York. Because of hockey and basketball, we will be off April 2, 5, 6 and 10th. Maybe more.

Friday April 4, 1969 – New York

I saw Al Butler several times while in Baltimore and had dinner with him. He is quite a fellow and was a fine contracting agent. He and [contracting agent] Bill Conway were the best.

John Ringling North is back in America with the biggest car in Europe. He saw the opening show at Madison Square Garden and will be in this country until June 10th. He looks good. He will go to Florida and do some touring while there. He will definitely see some changes in Venice. Henry will travel with the show but not John.

We will be playing Salem, Virginia a suburb of Roanoke. I don't think we will do much business and I hear the musicians there are the worst ever.

I am wondering how the Blue Unit will do for three months in Houston. They are spending a lot of money down there getting things ready.

We had a good opening in New York. The Garden was packed with 18,000, and they liked the show. We were off Wednesday, and yesterday both houses were good. It should be the same today. We are off tomorrow and Sunday, also next Thursday. If the Knicks can win some games, we will have more days off.

The band here in New York this year is very good, better than other years. The trombones are better than last year, but the second baritone is the worst man in the band. It is one of those things where the union wants me to use him, but they promise it will be his last year.

We have no riding acts in the show this year. They are no more.

Early in the season, Victor Gaona went home with a hernia and they brought a new catcher on, but the Gaonas were never out of the show. Victor came back in Baltimore and the other man left.

The Gaonas were supposed to do a trampoline act again this season, and they did it for a few shows, but then the



Bill Pruyn was hired to lead the new Blue Unit band in 1969, based in part on Merle Evans' recommendation.

Robert Handley photograph

bosses were afraid someone would get hurt. Tito is the only one who does anything in the flying act. The other boy has a bad shoulder and if Tito gets hurt, that will be the end of that act. He does all the tricks and the girl does two. Armando only does one, and Tito does the rest.

The Blue Unit will play Madison this season. I have seen our route until the end of the season and Madison is not on it. If the Blue plays there, you will see a lot of the same acts that we had last year.

Thursday May 8, 1969 – New York

We are now in our last week at the Garden and we are ready to get going. This has been a good date for the show. I have had a dandy band made up of 26 men and they can play the show. This is the best band I have ever had in New York.

I don't hear much from the other show, only that the music is not circus and it is a dance band instrumentation. Not

a gallop, smear or circus march in the program. I have had some mail about the music and I don't want any part of it. I am busy here.

I wish we were playing Madison. Maybe they will change the route. I have heard we will close in December in Utica, New York and it will be cold then.

John Ringling North will be with us on June 10th. He was at the show the opening night here in New York.

Tuesday June 3, 1969 – Philadelphia

We close here in Philadelphia tonight after 15 shows. I have 18 men in the band and they are good. Business is also good.

Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. closed here Sunday night and I went over and saw the layout Friday morning. While I was there, I saw Edna Antes, Arnold Maley, Johnny Sewell and the band boys. The lot was dirty and dusty. They have eight in the band and I could not imagine sleeping in the truck they have.

The Blue circus opened in Houston Friday night. I hear they had a good house, but it wasn't full. I wonder if biz will hold up for 13 weeks.

Sunday July 13, 1969 – Phoenix, Arizona

While we were in Dallas some of our people saw the Blue show in Houston. They said the show was OK, but they didn't have any business. The Blue show will close in Houston September 1st and then head to the Northwest and Western Canada. It will be cold up there in October. They will finish the season two weeks ahead of us. They don't have a very good route and they are not doing any biz in Houston.

Thursday July 31, 1969 – Los Angeles

We opened here Tuesday for 30 shows with three each Saturday. In fact, we will give three shows every Saturday until we close.



For 50 years, Merle Evans chose waltzes to accompany flying trapeze acts, starting with the Siegrist-Silbons in 1919, through the Codonas, Concellos and finally the Gaonas, seen here on the 1969 Red Unit.

Circus World Museum

My organ player had a heart attack and went home. We will miss him. I have a new man coming on in San Diego.

I heard Kelly-Miller is having a good season. All of the shows seem to be shorthanded. I heard that the Beatty show is very short of help and that they have sidewalled the big show when they couldn't get the big top up. Our circus in Houston is still having no biz. Well, they still have another month to go.

Bands we have are OK. I have 26 musicians here at the Forum and they do a good job. In San Francisco, I will have 30 men.

Friday August 29, 1969 – San Francisco

Coming into Oakland from Anaheim we were six hours behind a wreck, but we made Oakland in time for the matinee. We are using the same band here in San Francisco as in Oakland. The band is made up of 30 men and they aren't very good. We have a new contractor here for the band and only six of these men have ever played our show.

Last Friday in Oakland a tiger got out of its cage and injured five horses. One was badly hurt.

We opened here at the Cow Palace last night for nine shows and had a packed house. This was our best house ever here.

When we get to Denver, school will be in session and we will start giving matinees at 4:00 P.M. I don't mind them as I don't have to go to the building so early.

The Blue Unit will finish in Houston on Monday and then they will have a long run to Salt Lake City.

I have heard the flying acts on the Blue show are not too good, but we have heard nothing else. The only thing we hear about is the music. Nothing else. They have some rock and roll as you will see and hear when they play Madison.

I understand that the Red Unit will only play four weeks in Houston in 1970.

Sunday September 7, 1969 – Denver

Dorothy Herbert saw the show in San Francisco. You wouldn't recognize her. Mrs. Eugenie Silbon was also there for a performance at the Cow Palace. She is 91-years old and is in a nursing home. She looked wonderful.

We close here tomorrow night after ten shows. We have 20 men in the band here, and they raised the scale to \$30.00 per show with \$18.00 for a two-hour rehearsal and \$45.00 for a third show. We gave three shows yesterday and the musicians made \$105, not bad, but some of them are not worth that kind of money.

Tuesday September 23, 1969 – Indianapolis

Our business in Champaign was not as good as last year and the band was only fair. We gave three shows at the Assembly Hall Saturday, in fact, we will give three shows every Saturday until we close.

I heard about Johnny Herriott coming to our show next

year. The other news is that Harold Ronk will go to the Blue Unit along with Duane Thorpe. We will get the announcer from the Blue show, and some of our best acts will go over there. We will have a light group of acts next year.

When we were in South Bend, I went to the arena for



Vocalist Harold Ronk began working with Merle Evans in 1952, and after he made the transition from canvas to arenas he took on the additional duties of Ringmaster. Following the 1969 season Ronk moved to the Blue Unit for the 100th Anniversary production.

Robert Handley photograph

my noon rehearsal and waited. I finally asked the manager about the band and was told that no one had engaged any musicians. They got busy and a band arrived only a half hour before show time. We had no time for rehearsal and they never did get with the music.

Bill Pruyn fired three saxes in Seattle last week and the



Circus vice president Rudy Bundy was a close friend of Evans and would often play clarinet during performances. When this photograph was taken in Utica, New York on the last day of the 1969 season, Evans had yet to announce his future, though Bundy had told management he was planning to retire. Less than a month later Evans submitted his resignation, and Bundy was persuaded to continue in an executive role with the circus.

Rudy Bundy scrapbook, Bill Armstrong collection

show had to pay them. I played Seattle and never had any problems.

Thursday October 8, 1969 – Chicago

We opened here at the International Amphitheatre for 27 shows, with three shows on Saturdays. The band here in Chicago is always good with 23 men. This will be my last good band.

Last week in Minneapolis our business was on the light side, in fact our business has been light since we left California.

The Blue Unit will close in Detroit. The show was originally to close in Utica, but the route was changed. After the Blue show closes, a couple of their acts will join us for the last two weeks of the season.

Thursday October 24, 1969 – Pittsburgh

We opened Tuesday night for nine performances with only night shows through Friday. We will give three tomorrow and close with two on Sunday and will have the same number of shows in Hershey. The band here is just fair, nothing like I had in Chicago and I won't have any more good bands. Cleveland will be the best of what is left this season.

I have heard nothing from the Blue show at all, so I don't know how they are doing. When the Blue show opens in Detroit they will have opposition. An ice show is also there, along with a musical at the Fisher Theatre and the Auto Show at the Cobo Annex. It will not be a good date for the show.

The band in Chicago was among the best, and the band here in Pittsburgh is not too hot. The music is hard and they all have trouble in spots. The new organ player is good and is a nice fellow.

Friday November 7, 1969, Charlotte, NC

The Blue Unit has not had a very good season and I'm glad I'm not paying for the railroad moves for these shows.

I have been told that next year Harold Ronk will go to the Blue show, along with Duane Thorpe, Prince Paul, Doug Ashton and Otto Griebing, if he is able.

If they carry five key band men next year, it will cost them. In a lot of these towns like Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco you have to use a minimum number of local musicians and the scale is now around \$30 per show. I used 27 band men in San Francisco, and with seven more men you would have 34 in the band which would cost plenty.

All of my music is circus from start to finish. When people go to the opera they want to hear opera music, same with a symphony. When they go to the circus, they want to hear circus. Maybe Bill Pruyn doesn't know circus music. When he was with Tom Packs he played what he is playing now. He has sold Feld on upgrading his band. Well you can't get circus music with a dance band.

The band here is fair as is business. Three shows tomorrow and close with two on Sunday. We won't get to Cleveland until Wednesday night.

Tuesday November 18, 1969 – Buffalo, New York

Cleveland was good for the show and we had some sellouts. It was the best business I have ever seen in Cleveland and as always, the band was good. Most had played the Grotto Circus with me.

The Mills brothers were around several times. I think Jack wants to take out a one-ring circus, but Jake wants a three-ringer.

We opened last night with half a house. The band here is OK with 20 men playing. We have 11 shows here and 11 in Utica.

The announcer from the Blue show [Robert Welz] is here. He will be with this show next year. Harold Ronk will be on the Blue Unit along with some of our best acts.

Bill Pruyn will arrange the production numbers for the Blue Unit next year. I have only played two of his arrangements. I do know he has a lot of work to do with four production numbers next season. After they are done, Barstow will make cuts and he will have to change some which is quite a chore.

We have had a 47-week season and that is too long.

The TV show will be taped in St. Petersburg the day after the Venice stand ends and it will be shown on January 27. That is earlier than usual. I don't know who the star will be or the sponsor.

Saturday December 13, 1969 – Sarasota

The Blue Unit is in rehearsals now and has been for a week. I saw Bill Pruyn and I don't know what he has in mind for music this year. I heard his wife playing the organ. It is a small one and I don't care for the bass on it. I will tell you more about the music when I hear it.

Some of our acts that will go to the Blue Unit include the Gaona flying act along with Otto Griebing, Harold Ronk, Duane Thorpe and others. The Red Unit will be on the weak side, though they do have a 17-lion act [Wolfgang Holtzmair] coming in from Spain.

Well here is the news:

Nena and I are retiring from the Big Show. They are trying to get us to change our mind, but I have been in this biz 60 years and think we should take it easy. I don't know who they will hire in my place, but the days of circus music are gone, and no one today knows what to play for any acts.

Nena is still working and will finish in Venice January 1st.

Thursday December 25, 1969 – Sarasota

I did not want to go out this past season, but we decided to anyway.

The circus has been good us, and it has made me. If it was not for the circus no one would have ever heard of me.

The Blue show will be a good show. They took the four best acts we had along with Ronk and Duane Thorpe to back him up as announcer. The Red show won't have much that I can tell you now, and they will have a lousy route of two-day stands.

They wanted us to stay on the show and they had [Performance Director] Bob Dover come to see me. Mr. Feld talked to Nena, but we decided we should get away.

So, the days of circus music and circus bands are gone, along with Show Boats, Minstrel Shows and Vaudeville.

But I can always say I was with the Ringling Circus when it was something, and you will never see it again.

With best wishes, from us,

Merle and Nena **BW**

Acknowledgements

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The last blast. Merle Evans retired after the end of the 1969 season with Ringling. This photo records his final performance leading the band in Utica, New York on November 30, 1969.

Rudy Bundy scrapbook, Bill Armstrong collection

CIRCUS IN JAPAN:

EDO AND MEIJI JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

by Drs. Jeanne-Yvonne and Gérard Borg • © Circus Art Museum

All of the woodblock prints reproduced in this article are from the collection of Drs. Jeanne-Yvonne and Gérard Borg.



Unknown artist, early 1800s. The wording on the right identifies the shamisen and flute players by name. The wording on the left roughly translates to "several shows each day with expected full attendance."

Since the 1860s, Japanese woodblock prints have been highly sought after due to their marvelous depictions of landscapes, warriors, geishas and mythological tales. Some rare, mostly unknown prints relate to circus history dating from the traditional street performances of the Edo period to the arrival of western circuses at the opening of Japan and the Meiji restoration.

The authors have selected 20 original prints from their large collection, which trace the evolution of the circus in Japan during the 19th century. These art treasures were created as an invitation to attend performances and advertise the dates and locations of upcoming performances.

Many of these prints are exceptionally rare and some of them can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Edo Museum in Tokyo, and the Lavenberg Collection and Guimet National Museum of Asian Art in Paris.

The Traditional Circus during the Edo Period

During the Edo period (1603-1868), when the military Tokugawa shogun family ruled the country, Japan was completely closed to visitors and isolated from other cultures. However, internally the country was prosperous and rich in arts and crafts. Prints referred to as “ukiyo-e” (the floating world) were widely distributed during this period. The founder of ukiyo-e was Monorabu in the mid-17th century whose multi-colored prints – sometimes named “nishiki-e” – began to flourish from about 1765.

The delicate process of creating these prints required four artisans: a painter, an engraver, a printer and a publisher. The painter would first make a drawing and choose the colors. Once the artwork was complete, a highly skilled engraver carved one cherry woodblock for each of the colors. Next, the printer placed the colors on the woodblocks and pressed mulberry paper onto each of the colored woodblocks. After the publisher approved the product, a series of prints could be produced.

One-sheet prints (not to be confused with Western printing sizes) were often about 10 x 14 inches, a size known as “ôban.” However, diptych (two side-by-side scenes) or triptych (three side-by-side scenes), and sometimes even more were often produced. Finally, an editor usually placed date and censorship seals on the prints.

Great masters such as Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Kuniyoshi created prints that illustrated several-centuries-old traditional circus performances – street shows called “mishemono” (a thing to see). These shows were sometimes itiner-



Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1843. Published by Yamaguchi-Ya Tobei. Here the greatest street juggler of the first half of the 19th century, Takezawa Toji, is depicted spinning tops – something both children and adults often did competitively in Japan.

ant, but more often they were performed in popular districts such as Asakusa or Ryôgoku in the city of Edo (now known as Tokyo), or they were presented at secular or religious festivals.

Prints from this period advertised antipodists (foot jugglers), Icarian games, and acrobats on ropes, poles or ladders. They also included jugglers who manipulated balls, hoops, spinning tops, diablos, pots or fans. Often times the performers were depicted in scenes where they were accompanied by musicians (sometimes women) who played shamisen, flutes or tambourines.

Although the artists portrayed were apparently quite famous at the time, little is known today about these adult and child performers. One exception was the great spinning tops juggler, Takezawa Toji, who was a genuine star in the first half of the 19th century.



Toyouni III, 1855. This is a triptych wherein jugglers were drawn as Kabuki actors.

In the mid-19th century, there were several well-known touring companies in Japan such as the Hayatake Torakichi troupe that was based in Osaka. They arrived in Edo in 1857 and performed along the high street of Ryōgoku. In the short span of about two months, they achieved considerable popularity. Their fame was immortalized by about 30 prints drawn by masters Kuniyoshi or Kunisada II. These series of prints provide a wonderful record with scenes showing blankets of snow, flowers and the moon. In these prints, Torakichi balances a ladder or a pole on his feet or shoulders on which other performers juggle or offer acrobatic skills.

During the Edo period, it was very unusual to see exotic animals exhibited in cages. An exception was the



Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1857. Published by Daikokuya Kinnosuke. The renown Hayatake Torakichi, dressed in a Kabuki theatre costume, balances two children in this print titled "Shakkio" (the stone bridge). All three acrobats wear a lion wig recalling the Buddhist tale of a dancing lion who announced a god living behind a "stone bridge."



Utagawa Kunisada II, 1857. This series of three polychrome woodblock prints called "Snow – Flower – Moon" depicts Hayatake Torakichi and his Osaka-based troupe that went to Edo in 1857. The troupe performed in the high street neighborhood of Ryôgoku where it was hugely popular. Each of these prints is signed by "Baichôrô" Kunisada in "toshidama cartouches."

Left, in the first of these, a juggler balances on small wheels while a samurai-dressed performer climbs a rope to a cherry blossom ceiling.

Bottom left, the second print calls to mind the stone bridge fable as Hayatake Torakichi balances a ladder on his left foot which supports two acrobats on a platform. Each performer is again shown with a lion's mane wig.

Below, the third of these Kunisada II prints has an acrobat in traditional Kabuki costume walking on a rope, surrounded by mums and butterflies, as another artist wearing extended wooden sandals balances on a pole.



tora (tiger), the third animal of the Japanese Zodiac calendar that had been imported from Chinese Buddhism and used during the Edo period. Yoshitoyo painted one such tiger that was exhibited in 1860. Monkey trainers were also popular in the traveling street shows of the period and were depicted in beautiful Kuniyoshi prints and Kunisada drawings.

Risley's Circus Visits Yokohama

During expeditions in 1852 and 1854, American Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794-1858), played a leading role in opening Japan to the West. President Millard Fillmore had ordered Perry to open Japanese ports to American

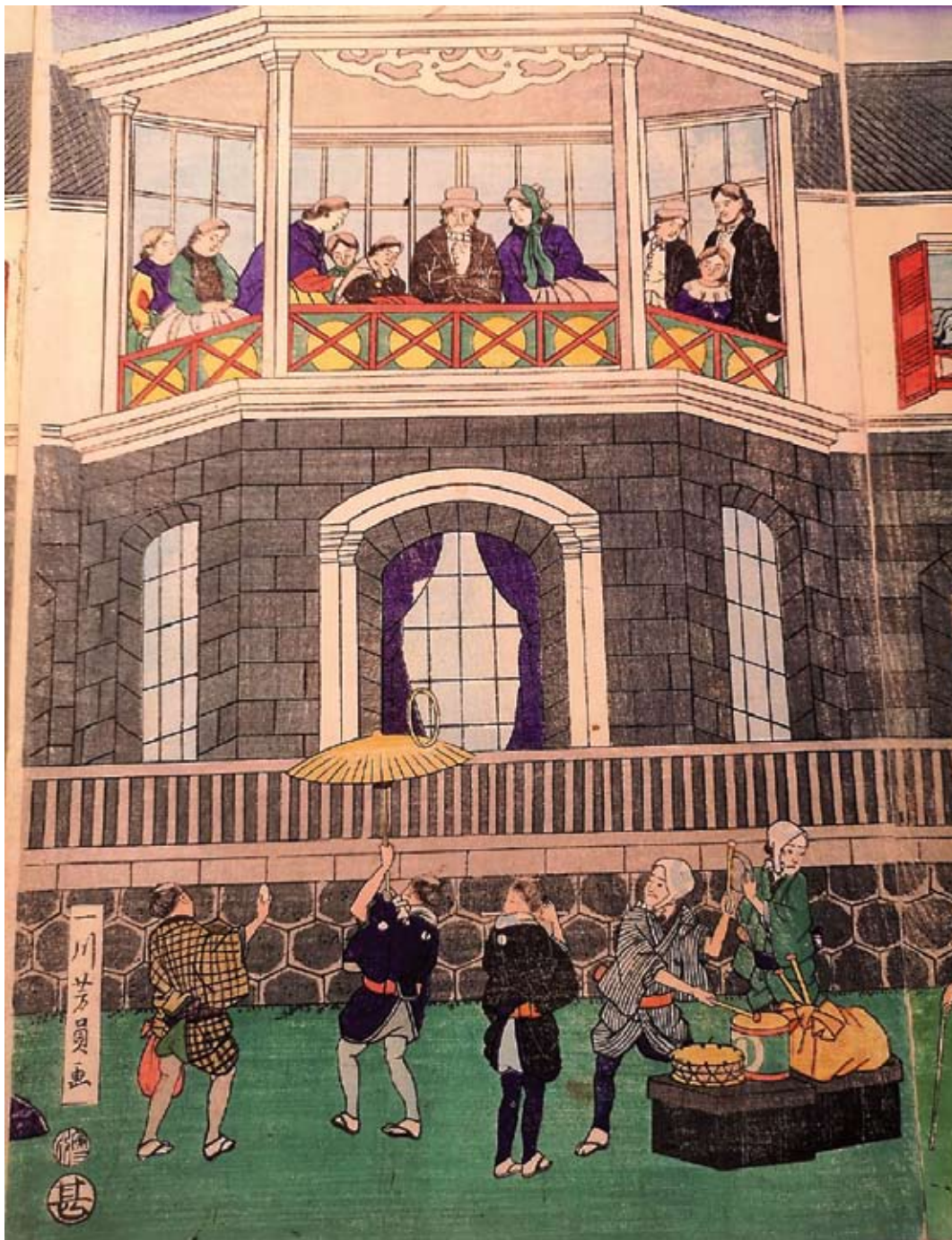


Above, Ickiryusai Yoshitoyo, July 1860. During the Edo period, very few exotic animals were exhibited in Japan. On this print titled "Tiger in a cage," a leopard actually was drawn attacking two roosters.

Top right, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, c. 1843. The dutiful youth, Koshi Yoji, is portrayed working with a monkey to earn money to help his sick mother, as a child looked on. During the Edo period, itinerant street performers often made appearances with trained monkeys.

Bottom right, Utagawa Kunisada, 1845. Published by Ezakiya Kichibei. Seen dancing with a monkey was the well-known Kabuki actor, Nakamura Utaemon IV.





Utagawa Yoshikazu, March 1866. Edited by Maruya Jinpachi. The title given to this art is "The foreigners house in Yokohama." Near the end of the Edo period, some Japanese harbors had been opened to European trade. In this triptych panel, Europeans watch a traditional Japanese street performance from the balcony of their house.

trade and to end Japan's era of national seclusion. Through forcible "gunboat diplomacy," Perry succeeded in opening some harbors to international markets. Foreigners, however, were restricted to a few designated areas.

The arrival from Shanghai of the American Richard Risley Carlisle's company in March of 1864 radically changed the course of circus history in Japan. The multi-talented "Professor Risley" had already traveled and performed throughout much of the world. His foot juggling act, in

which he spun and flipped other performers on his feet, was known at the time in all of the European capitals as well as in America. Once he arrived in Japan, he was given permission to perform on selected days in the city of Yokohama. Risley's show with ten performers and eight horses was the first western-style circus to appear in Japan. In addition to a performance that featured acrobats on large balls, tumbling acts, and juggling, it was during Risley's show that Japanese audiences first saw female equestrians and bareback riding,



Utagawa Yoshitora, March 1864. Published by Fujiokaya Keisuke. These woodblock prints illustrate the performance of Risley's circus in Yokohama after the troupe had traveled to Japan from central India. Note in the center panel the man juggling with four knives while balancing on a rolling globe.



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, March 1864. Each act in Risley's show in Yokohama is described in ideograms (kanji) in this print. Female performers were a genuine novelty in Japan at the time.

something totally new to Japan.

After his show closed, Risley remained in Japan for two years supporting himself by working on a dairy farm. By the time he left for the United States in 1866, he had been given permission to take several groups of Japanese artists with him. Eventually, Risley's troupe, billed as The Japan Imperial Artists Company, toured in Europe for two years.

Meiji Period – Soullier and Chiarini Two Incredible Western Circuses

The restoration of the Meiji Empire (1868-1912) marked the full opening of Japan to the West and unfettered access for foreign travelers. Early in this period, decorative objects and ukiyo-e had flooded the Parisian market, initiating "Japonism" in the West. This cultural dissemination occurred at a time when the widespread appeal of Asian performers was increasing in Europe, particularly in France. Against this background, it is time to relate the epic stories of two western circuses that visited the Japanese archipelago in the 19th century.

Louis Soullier, a famed French riding master, took his "Imperial Circus" to Vienna, Austria as early as 1835 where he demonstrated the art of equestrianism. During the time he was in Vienna, Soullier married Laura de Bach, another celebrated circus rider of the early 19th century. Soullier's troupe then traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia; the Balkan countries; as well as to Turkey with his newly titled "Cara-

vanserail" circus. Then between two tours in Europe, Soullier transported his show to the East, visiting China in 1854. It was more than 15 years later that Soullier made his first appearance in Japan, premiering in Yokohama in August of 1871. In December of that same year, the troupe played at Tokyo's Yasakuni Shrine.

Soullier's riding act astonished the Japanese people who had never seen such a performance. One observer at the time said, "the horses did everything but talk." On the wonderfully romantic triptych by Yoshiharu, the painter designed an amazing horse cavalcade with various male and female bareback and trick riders, as well as depictions of trapeze artists.

Look closely at the detail in the upper right of this print. The advertising red circle using both the Latin alphabet and the Japanese Kanji is seen along with an incredible pink cartouche with text written by a Meiji writer celebrating Soullier. An Ikkei print portrays the show in a comic manner. Soullier's tremendous success in Japan led to his organization of a Japanese troupe to journey with him to Paris in 1876.

The Chiarini saga was almost beyond one's imagination. Giuseppe Chiarini, who had been born in Rome, grew up in a multi-generational family of traveling acrobats. He was a student of the most prestigious riders including Adolph Franconi and Alessandro Guerra. Chiarini excelled in Haute Ecole (high school) and acrobatic riding exercises. After



Utagawa Yoshiharu, December 1871. Edited by Kiya Sôjirô. This print presents the popular French circus created by Louis Soullier that first arrived in Japan in 1871. Colored cartouches describe each feat in detail. The pink cartouche has text by the famous Meiji writer Kanagaki Ronbun celebrating Soullier as an old showman known around the world.



Shôsai Ikkei, December 1871. Editor by Tsutay Kichizô. This triptych print of Circus Soullier in Japan shows an amazing array of acts.



Yôshû Chikanobu, September 1886. Edited by Okura Shirote. At age 63, and after touring the world for 30 years with his Royal Italian Circus, Giuseppe Chiarini visited Japan for the first time. He arrived in Yokohama in July 1886 and then played in five other large cities. This richly colored triptych announced that the circus would perform at Akihabarain in the Kanda district of Tokyo beginning September 1. Chiarini introduced Japan to such performing exotic animals as tigers, elephants and ostriches. Note the elephant with its trainer's head in its mouth.



Yōshū Chikanobu, 1886. This wonderful print is part of a triptych showing Chiarini's circus in Japan. In the lower part of the scene, a costumed monkey leaps over a banner as two ostriches seem to admire the act.

spending some time in England, he traveled to the United States where, off and on for over a span of more than 40 years (1855-1897), his circus crisscrossed the American

theatre would sometimes mimic the circus "the day after" with a major actor portraying several roles of the performance.

continent.

In 1864, Chiarini built a magnificent 3,000-seat venue in Mexico. Then beginning in 1873, his Royal Italian Circus crossed the Pacific several times from its base in San Francisco, appearing in Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

It was in 1886 that the Chiarini Company received permission to visit Japan for the first time. Documents from the time list a large troupe of American and European artists, along with an orchestra made up of 13 musicians from Manila. In late July, performances began in Yokohama followed by successful visits to five other major Japanese cities.

In December 1886, the company gave a performance before Emperor Mitsuhiro and his court in Tokyo. It was the first time the Emperor had seen a complete circus and he was so impressed that he offered Chiarini gold valued at \$5,000. With the Emperor's endorsement, noblemen, officials, and businessmen flocked to the luxuriously appointed two-pole big top. Chikanobu's magnificent prints recorded the scope of the incredible show that included 75 performers and a menagerie with 26 horses, five ponies and several exotic animals including an elephant, lions, tigers and ostriches. It was the first time that some these species had been seen in a performance in Japan.

Among the acrobats on these ukiyo-e are two one-legged performers, one of them being a veteran of the American Civil War. Kabuki



Yōshū Chikanobu, 1886. Edited by Komiya Shobel. In November 1886, Chiarini and his company performed in Tokyo for Japanese Emperor Mitsuhiro and his court, seen in the pavilion on the right. A single pole tent can be seen in the background of the outdoor venue.



Utagawa Kunimasa IV, November 9, 1886. Edited by Hayashi Kichizō. This print portrays a production of the Kabuki theatre the day after a performance of Chiarini's circus. Such parodies were known as "overnight pickle day" shows. A Kabuki actor named Onoe Kikugorō V played four roles – Tom Harper, the one-legged American artist in the circus, the elephant trainer, Chiarini himself, and a clown seen on the right.



Above, unknown artist, 1881. Edited by Hayashi Kichizô. These two panels of a triptych show acrobats performing on bamboo ladders at a Japanese New Year festival. Some of the acrobats are dressed as firemen. The symmetrical volcanic cone of Mount Fuji is seen in the background.



Left, poster for the Okabe family in the United States, Friedlander No. 1240, 1898.



Poster for the Riogoku family who appeared in Cirque de Rouen in Normandy (France), Friedlander No. 4503, 1907.

Below, poster for the Riogoku family in France with the Grand Cirque National Suisse, c. 1901.

The Rouen Metropole Museum will host a large exhibition of Drs. Jeanne-Yvonne and Gérard Borg's wonderful Japanese prints as part of a comprehensive "Cirque et Saltimbanques" exhibition that will be on display at four museums in Rouen, France during the winter of 2020-2021.

The Days and Years that Followed

In the late 19th century, Japonism proliferated in European art with Japanese woodblock prints influencing the work of Impressionist artists as well as the Art Deco movement. French painters such as Monet, Van Gogh and Signac personally collected Japanese prints. During this same period, numerous Japanese acrobatic troupes performed in Europe and America. The French applauded some of these acrobats in a Folies Bergères show in 1888, the year before Buffalo Bill made his first appearance in Paris.

Two marvelous Friedlander posters printed in 1898 and 1907 were used to advertise the Okabe and Riogoku acrobatic Japanese troupes, respectively. Another poster for the Riogoku family's appearance with the Grand Cirque National Suisse of Captain Martin was used during a tour of France in 1900-1902. Sisters Marthe and Juliette Vesque painted Japanese acrobats who performed in Medrano about 1920. These are but a few examples of Japanese circus performers who carried forth the artistry now immortalized by the surviving woodblock prints of the 19th century. **BW**

Acknowledgement

The Borgs are grateful for assistance from Line Langlois-Deschamps, a student of Japanese history at the Sorbonne in Paris, who helped translate and understand the Japanese prints, spending several weeks at the Rouen Metropole Museum.





EXHIBITION:

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Circuses, expositions, and other forms of popular entertainment enchanted Western audiences with exotic peoples from faraway places in the nineteenth century. These entertainments had a profound impact on the way Westerners perceived the peoples of other parts of the world. This exhibition features a selection of the posters produced to advertise these living attractions.

Life Courment Freres, Clou de Exposition: Panorama Animal (detail), 1900. Ink on paper, 80 x 57 in. Tibbels Circus Collection. ht2005097

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Circus Collection in Amsterdam Now Online



by Willem Rodenhuis

This meerschaum cigar pipe was made in Vienna around 1880. It was presented to Oscar Carré by the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph, as a token of his satisfaction with Carré, who had trained Empress Elizabeth ("Sissy") to ride on horse back.

In November 2018, the website Circusmuseum.nl was launched as a platform for access to the rich circus collection of the University of Amsterdam.¹ This provided a new digital platform for researching circus heritage in the Netherlands as well as around the world.

Some history to begin with...

In 1964, the library of the University of Amsterdam acquired by bequest of the late K. D. "Kees" Hartmans (1906-1963) a collection of almost 2,000 books concerning the circus, with a special focus on children's books. During his professional career as the librarian of the Amsterdam city archives, Hartmans became friends with the librarian of the University of Amsterdam, Dr. Herman de la Fontaine Verwey, who with great enthusiasm accepted the bequest along with an amount of 10,000 guilders (about \$34,000 today) for future acquisitions. The circus collection was housed in the special collections department, where it is still located at the present time.

Library staff member Marja Keyser published a catalogue of the circus collection in 1968, and Raymond Toole-Stott devoted a volume of his paramount

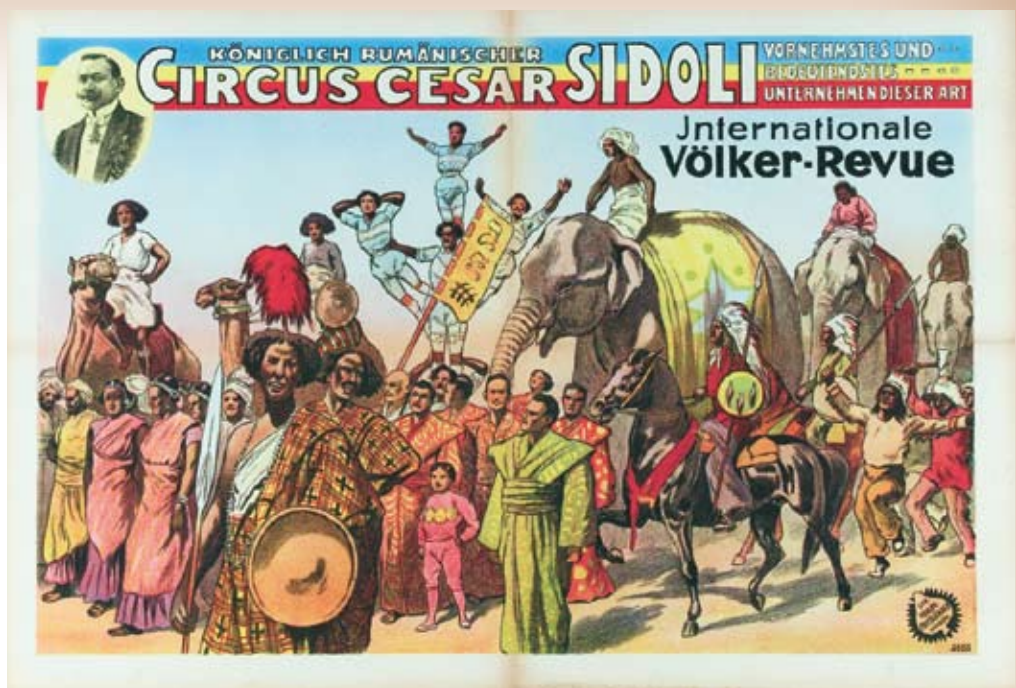


Around 1870, Otto Eerelman painted this oil on canvas titled *Amalia Carré-Salamonsky behind the scenes*. Amalia Carré, the wife of Oscar Carré, was a skilled and very athletic woman, as well as a well known circus performer. Otto Eerelman, who was a popular artist in his time, often chose horses and dogs as his subjects. He was befriended by the Carré family, allowing him access to work in the wings of the circus.

bibliography *Circus and Allied Arts: a World Bibliography* (Derby, 1958-1971) to the Hartmans circus collection. Both by the publication of the bibliographical data and additional donations during the 1960s and 1970s, the circus collection garnered more and more attention of researchers and circus lovers, resulting in several publications, television and documentary film coverage and participation in exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad.

In subsequent years, the circus collection acquired additional books, photos, programs, letters, lithographs, posters, artifacts and paintings from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Important donations were accepted from impresario and circus historian Jo van Doveren (archives and correspondence), photographer Heinz Baudert (photos), horse trainer and ringmaster Bob Schelfhout (archives and personal diaries), and Bartele Stapert whose collection was focused on the field of street-organs, dance hall organs, and machinery for fairgrounds and amusement parks.

For those in the United States it will be interesting to know that the Jo van Doveren (1901-1968) book collection was auctioned off in London after his death, and was then



The Royal Romanian Circus Cesar Sidoli featured an international "Volker Revue" (people show) much like Barnum & Bailey had assembled with its Ethnological Congress a few years earlier. Adolph Friedländer (No. 5625), c. 1900.

sold and shipped to the Milner Library at Illinois State University.

In the 1980s and 1990s the circus collection received less attention, although the acquisition of books continued. New developments, however, occurred in the new millennium when information technology spread its wings and the notion of cultural heritage increasingly influenced the practice of curating and fostering the rare books department of the University of Amsterdam.

The new millennium and the era of digitization

The increasing power of digital equipment brought new possibilities for the retrieval, cataloguing and presentation of cultural heritage. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library) in The Hague launched a project, named *Metamorfoze*, meant to safeguard vulnerable, rare and precious printed materials by digitization. The Amsterdam circus collection was one of the academic collections that was selected for the project. This selection provided recognition that the circus as a variety in the field of cultural heritage was a very significant step forward toward



Souvenir postcards like this one printed in German, were sold on Barnum & Bailey's European tour 1898-1902.



A colored lithograph for the Frères Franconi provided an overview of the riding skills, stunts and spectacular show audiences could expect nearly 200 years ago.

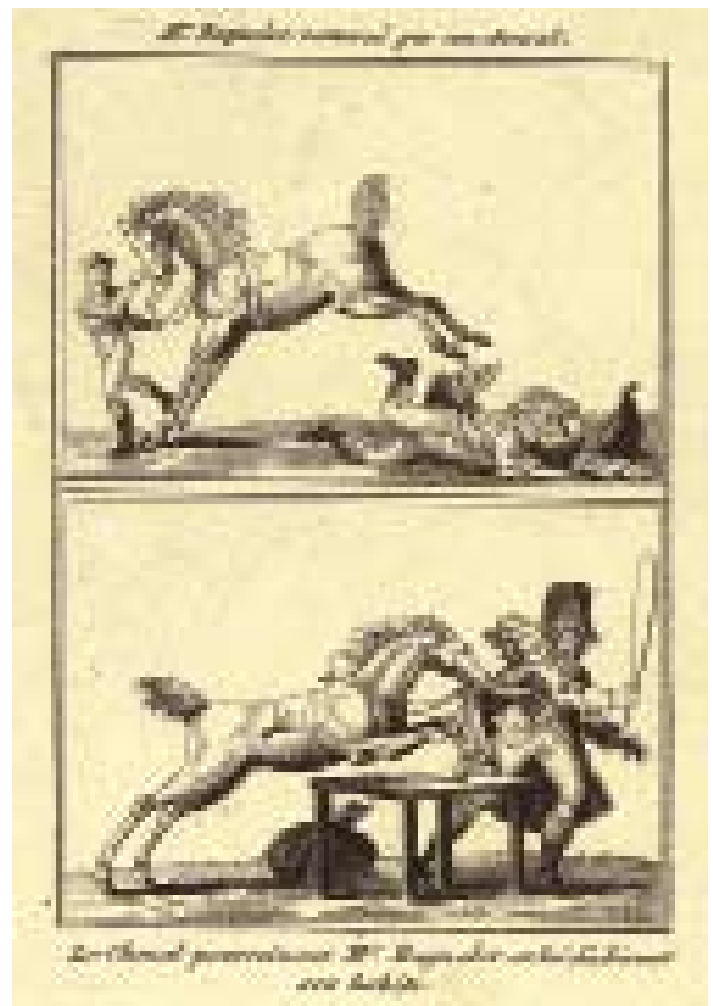
the canonical status of the circus.

However, in the early 21st century, the colorful and large sized items of the circus collection (i.e. posters) could still not be handled by the available equipment. This was because the storage capacity of the equipment fell short, the scanning process took too much of time, and lenses for scanning purposes were still not suited for the registration of the many large format posters. Consequently, the digitization project had to be postponed. That changed around 2010 when the industry had developed equipment that could meet the standards needed for academic digitization purposes.

Moreover, two major circus collections were added to the existing one. In 2012, the collection of the Theater Instituut Nederland (TIN, Theatre Institute of the Netherlands) was added, and in 2016 the renowned collection of Jaap Best² (1912-2002) was acquired. This expansion of the collection led to the need to integrate all of the items using one digital tool. The resulting solution was the installment of the device *Circusmuseum.nl* made accessible to a worldwide public in November 2018. Among several smaller, but high profile collections, the TIN acquisition included the Herman Linssen (1934-) collection, consisting of posters, programs, photos, books and magazines, systematically organized and administrated by means of a highly accurate microfiche system. The Best collection added, apart from books, photos and programs, a splendid collection of Adolph Friedländer posters, covering almost the entire production of this famous Hamburg-based printshop that produced posters between 1872 and 1933. Friedländer's company flourished for decades, contracted the best designers of his time, and it got orders for poster design and printing from all over Europe

and the United States. Friedländer was forced to close in 1933 as a consequence of the Nazi government's abject policy against Jewish owned companies.

Both the Linssen and the Best collections needed special attention and integration into the existing digital platform, as developed during the years 2012-2016. The Linssen database covers information regarding more than 4,000 circuses, their company names, management, years of operation, contracted artists, programs, posters, flyers and newspaper clippings. Playlists of these companies are to be added in near future. The Friedländers, as they are called, of the Jaap Best collection consist of more than 7,300 numbered posters, a few of them without a production number as those items were printed



This Baptiste Loisset etching, titled How a horse catches a pickpocket, dates from the late 18th century.



Adolph Friedländer printed this poster (No. 7387) in his Hamburg printshop for Circus Busch about 1905. It is an example of a “pantomime show,” a re-enactment of a literary saga in a circus performance.

in the first years of the company’s existence. Now that the digital platform *Circusmuseum.nl* has been launched, the full variety and richness of the composited collection can be researched and used for presentations, papers, television or film documentaries, and all sort of printed publications. And this resource meets the very objective of the University of Amsterdam, that is to draw the attention of researchers to the circus collection and to facilitate their needs for information.

Website content and illustrations

The Amsterdam circus collection ranges from the 18th century until the present day, with an emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries. Going through the items, one is struck by the richness of the available materials, testifying about human life and cultures no longer in existence. However, it is important for the present generation to have access to information and expressions of cultures of the past.

In the academic realm,

the circus had by tradition a modest reputation, if not to say, it was totally neglected. This omission has changed over the past four decades, leading to a growing activity of research, studies and publications, not only of a particular person in history, but also relevant from the point of view of ethology, psychology, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. The Fédération Mondiale du Cirque plays a vital role in this process, by uniting and stimulating academics to focus on the circus, as does the working group Popular Entertainment of FIRT, the International Federation of Theatre Research. In this regard, the digitization of the collections can be seen as a blessing for researchers, as the access to illustrations has become so much easier than in the past. And the vast historical resources are of tremendous value to researchers as well as to those who read their findings. Moreover, the bachelor theatre studies curriculum of

the University of Amsterdam offers a lecture on the basis of the circus collection, enabling students to get familiar with the items in the collection and also with the historical and theoretical themes in the field of the circus.

The selection of illustrations for this article covers some of the many forms the circus has taken in the past and also



So-called “freaks of human nature” were depicted on this Adolph Friedländer (No. 8248) *Passepartout* (master key) design from around 1910.



Heinz Baudert photographed ten acrobats performing with Chinese poles in Amsterdam during the 1960s.

emphasizes the continuity through the centuries of the circus as a form of popular amusement culture. The horse is an example of this continuity, along with the dressage of other animals, as are the acrobatic skills, clowns acts and the so-called pantomimes – spectacular shows that enacted literary themes or historical events. All of these items can be downloaded free of charge, in a resolution (300 dpi) that meets today's academic standards for digital storage and application. This format also allows reproductions of the material at a professional level. Since the launch of the website *circusmuseum.nl* we have already seen some of the Amsterdam images in publications, on instagram, but also as postcards or even jig saw puzzles, and that is exactly what the website is intended for.

However, when going through the catalogue as presented on the website one will notice that not all of the items are presented as a thumbnail. It is foreseen that the presentation of the materials will increase in future months, optimizing research potential and results considerably. This is also true for the hands-on guide that has been added in order to facilitate the research of the Herman Linssen database, i.e. the many circus performances and their venues until the year 2000. The content of the website is organized by a total of 22 windows (section *Highlights* in the homepage), covering the many genres or themes of the circus. By exploring the windows, web-

site visitors will get an overview of the items that the museum website offers. Moreover, the additional two catalogue entries, in combination with the Linssen database, offer a complete instrument for the research of the database content. The web designers are relying on the experience and skills



The vast circus collection materials at the University of Amsterdam are preserved in secure, climate-controlled "stacks."



Left, Germany's Circus Busch promised a mythical spectacle of improbable proportions. The University of Amsterdam collections includes several thousand different circus posters.

of visitors when researching, a readiness that may be expected in this digital era.

Still, curator Hans van Keulen is ready to support any visitor of the site, or deal with issues connected to the publication of the available materials. This is also true for orders of the Jaap Best booklet. Van Keulen's email address is <j.h.k.vankeulen@uva.nl>. **Bw**

All images accompanying this article are of collection items at the University of Amsterdam. They were provided by Willem Rodenhuis.

Endnotes

1. On January 1, 2019 the Special Collections Department became a branch of the archeological museum of the University of Amsterdam, operating as *Allard Pierson, the Collections of the University of Amsterdam*.
2. Dick H. Vrieling, *The Best of Best. The unique circus collection of Jaap Best* (Amsterdam: Bijzondere Collecties Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2017).



In the 1960s and 1970s the Russian State Circus visited the Netherlands several times. Clown Oleg Popov was a Soviet circus celebrity, and this poster provides evidence that he was widely known in Europe in those days.



About the Author

Willem Rodenhuis is a theatre historian. He earned a bachelor degree in history from the Utrecht University and a master degree in theatre research from the University of Amsterdam. He was a subject librarian for the performing arts and media at the Library of the University of Amsterdam for 20 years beginning in 1990. In 2010, he became the curator of the Performing Arts and Media Collections at the Special Collections Department of the Library of the University of Amsterdam. In this position that he held until his retirement in 2016, he was, along with others, responsible for the circus collection and its digitization.



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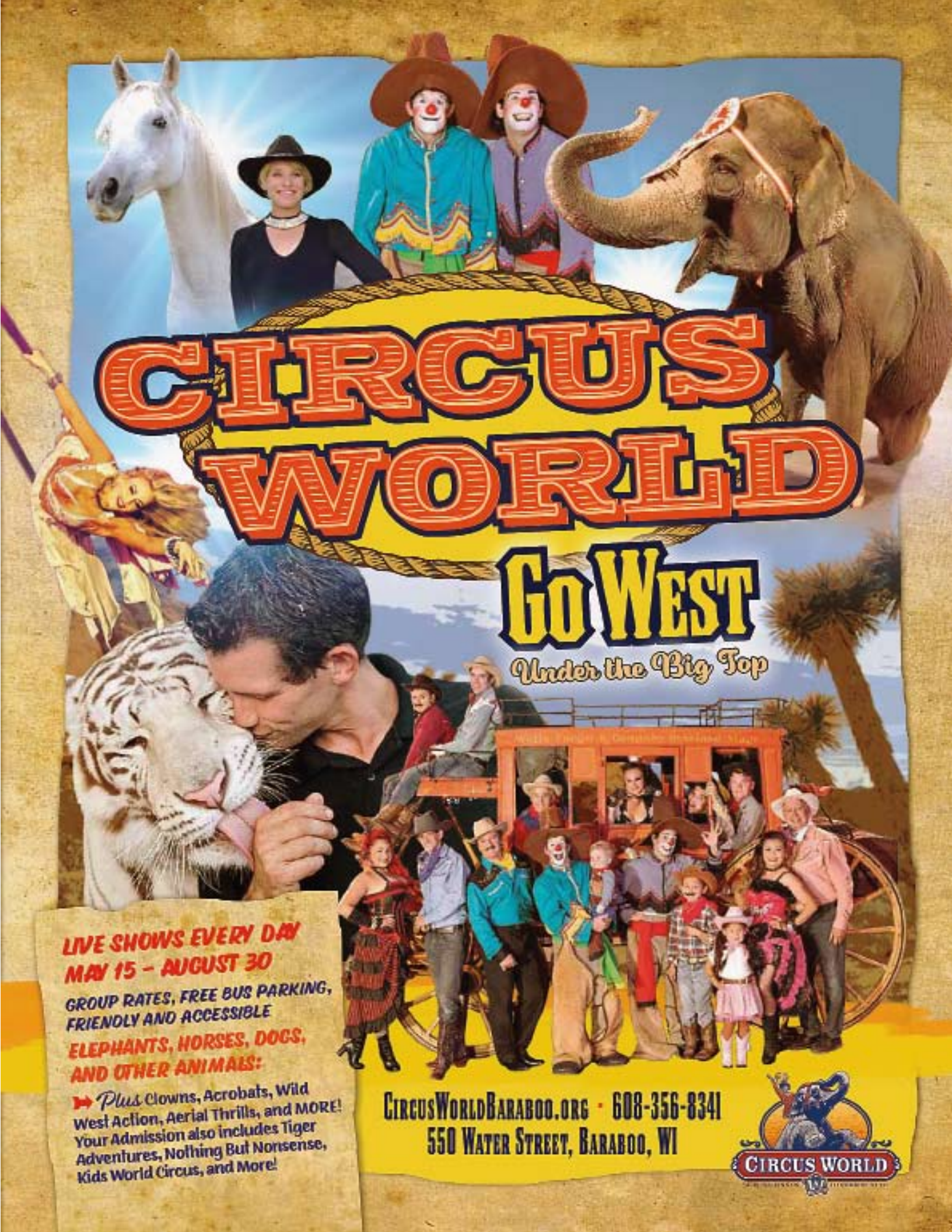
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Irvin Feld, 1969

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